



Macau's health e-vouchers extended to Guangdong

Tony Wong

The Macau government announced yesterday that local residents can start using their health e-vouchers at eligible clinics in Guangdong Province next month when the 2026 round of its annual medical subsidy programme commences.

The amount of the health vouchers will remain unchanged at 700 patacas.

The new measure announced yesterday comes after the use of Macau-issued health vouchers was extended to Hengqin in 2024.

Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak and Health Bureau (SSM) Director Alvis Lo Iek Long made the announcement during a press conference at Government Headquarters yesterday. Wong is also the spokesman for the government's top advisory Executive Council.

Wong said that the council, which is headed by Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai, has completed its discussion of the administrative regulation (by-law) on the new 2026 round of the government's annual medical subsidy programme, which will start on June 1.

The amount of the annual health vouchers for each recipient was 500 patacas when the programme was

launched in 2009. The amount was raised to 600 patacas in 2013, before it was increased to the current 700 patacas last year.

Since its launch, the scheme has only benefitted permanent local residents.

Sticking to the same *modus operandi* as in the past several years, the 2026 round of health e-vouchers will be valid for two years, because of which beneficiaries can use their health e-vouchers until May 31, 2028.

The local government expects to spend 520 million patacas on the new 2026 round of health e-vouchers, Wong said.

The government said last year that the 2025 round was budgeted at 519 million patacas.

The medical subsidy programme's 2024 round extended the use of health vouchers to the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

Wong said yesterday that after the use of health vouchers was extended to eligible clinics in Hengqin in 2024, the use of the new 2026 round of health e-vouchers will be extended to eligible clinics as well as outpatient departments of other medical institutions in the whole of Guangdong Province.

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A woman walks past a clinic on Travessa de S. Domingos yesterday, an alley running between Largo do Senado, the city's main square, and Largo da Sé, where the city's Catholic Cathedral is located. — Photo: Tony Wong

Israeli PM made secret UAE visit during war with Iran, office says

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a secret visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and met with UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan during the war with Iran, his office said yesterday.

"The visit led to a historic breakthrough in relations between Israel and the UAE," Netanyahu's office said in a statement, without providing details.

It is Netanyahu's first known visit to the UAE and the second time an Israeli prime minister has visited the Gulf country.

The announcement came amid

media reports of recent visits to the UAE by Israel's top security officials, signaling deepening security ties between the two countries, which first normalized ties in 2020.

Mossad intelligence agency chief David Barnea visited the UAE at least twice in March and April to coordinate on the war with Iran, *The Wall Street Journal* reported yesterday, citing Arab officials.

Israel's state-owned Kan News reported that Shin Bet internal security agency chief David Zini had also visited the UAE.

— Xinhua



US President Donald Trump arrives in Beijing last night for a state visit. At the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Trump is visiting China until tomorrow afternoon. Both heads of state will start their talks this morning. — Xinhua (More on pages 6 & 7)

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No cadmium please: French want less toxin in their baguettes

France is mulling how to prevent people from ingesting too much of the heavy metal cadmium, after a warning their breakfast cereal and baguettes could be contaminated with the toxin.

— Story on p. 10

France locks down 1,700 on cruise ship after 92-year-old dies

BORDEAUX — French authorities yesterday confined more than 1,700 passengers and crew on a British cruise ship after an elderly passenger died and dozens suffered upset stomachs, health officials said.

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After winter storms, fires now threaten Portugal's forests

In a forest of pine and eucalyptus trees in central Portugal, chainsaws and diggers hum away clearing paths blocked by trees uprooted in winter storms, but the threat now is a high risk of summer fires.

— Story on p. 12

Fireman arrested for masturbating in stairwell in front of 12-year-old girl



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Ho Wai Lok looks on during yesterday's press conference. – Photo: Armindo Neves

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a man on Tuesday after a 12-year-old girl saw him masturbating in the stairwell of a residential building last week, PJ spokesman Ho Wai Lok revealed during a regular press conference yesterday afternoon.

Ho identified the suspect as a 35-year-old male surnamed Sin, who told PJ officers that he works for the Macau Public Security Forces (FSM).

According to Ho, the incident occurred at around noon last Tuesday when the girl was on her way home from school in Patane district. Upon reaching a landing between the first and second floors of her residential building, she witnessed the suspect masturbating. The girl immediately informed her family, who reported the matter to the Public Security

Police (PSP) later that day.

Following a referral from the PSP, PJ officers went to the scene to carry out a forensic investigation. Ho said that traces of semen left by Sin were collected and sent for testing.

Upon his arrest on Tuesday, Sin reportedly admitted to the act, claiming it was driven by a "momentary sexual impulse." He told investigators that he had entered the building at random after finding the main gate unlocked.

Ho added that Sin pointed out that the incident took place outside of his working hours. Investigators subsequently discovered further traces of the suspect's semen in another building within the same district, Sin admitted that he had carried out similar acts in two different buildings between last

Monday and Tuesday.

Sin was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday afternoon to face possible charges of sexual abuse of a child.

According to Article 166 of the Macau Penal Code, Sin faces a prison term of up to three years for "committing an exhibitionist act of a sexual nature in the presence of a minor under the age of 14."

Ho did not elaborate on Sin's marital status.

Meanwhile, the Fire Services Bureau (CB) announced in a statement yesterday evening that Sin is a firefighter.

According to the statement, in response to the incident, the bureau has initiated disciplinary proceedings and imposed preventive suspension measures on Sin. It also said that it would pursue

disciplinary liability in accordance with the law. According to the statement, the bureau's top officers have immediately ordered that moral education and supervision of personnel be strengthened. They also have issued a strict reminder that all firefighters must always abide by the law and discipline, uphold professional ethics, and protect the reputation of the service, the statement said, adding that all personnel are to take this case as a warning and never defy the law.

Led by Secretary for Security Chan Tsz King, the Macau Public Security Forces comprise the Unitary Police Service (SPU), the Public Security Police (PSP), the Fire Services Bureau (CB), the Customs Service, the Correctional Services Bureau (DSC), and the Macau Public Security Forces Academy. ■

Macau records year's first imported malaria case

Armindo Neves

The Health Bureau (SSM) announced in a statement that Macau yesterday confirmed its first imported case of malaria this year.

The bureau said it received a report confirming the case from the public Conde de São Januário Hospital Centre (CHSCJ) on Tuesday.

The bureau identified the patient as a 47-year-old man from the Chinese mainland. He travelled alone to Nigeria, West Africa, for business from April 22 to 28. After returning to the Chinese mainland, he developed symptoms on Wednesday last week, including fever and diarrhoea, the statement said.

Self-medicating did not relieve his symptoms. The patient then entered Macau last Friday and sought medical attention at the public Conde de São Januário Hospital Centre on Monday, where he was diagnosed with malaria caused by *Plasmodium falciparum**, the statement said, adding that he was admitted to hospital on the same day for further treatment.

Based on the patient's travel history, the timeline of the symptoms onset, and laboratory test results, according to the statement, the case has been classified as an imported case of malaria.



This 2009 file photo shows an *Aedes aegypti* mosquito feeding in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. – Photo courtesy of Muhammad Mahdi Karim/Wikimedia Commons

The statement underlined that the patient remains hospitalised and is in serious condition.

The statement noted that malaria is a vector-borne communicable disease transmitted by infected female Anopheline mosquitoes.

Details in English about malaria can be found at: <https://www.chp.gov.hk/en/healthtopics/content/24/30.html>. ■

* *Plasmodium falciparum* is a unicellular parasite and the most lethal species that causes malaria in humans. It is transmitted through the bite of an infected female *Anopheles* mosquito. – Gemini

Police arrest Filipino for drug-trafficking & drug-taking

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a male Philippine national for drug-trafficking and drug-taking on Tuesday, PJ spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Ho identified the suspect as a 27-year-old non-resident-worker (NRW) surnamed Cayas, working as a salesman.

According to Ho, based on a tip-off, the Judiciary Police discovered that Cayas was suspected of drug-related activities, such as selling e-cigarette oil containing drug ingredients to compatriots.

PJ officers arrested Cayas in the city centre on Tuesday and seized three e-cigarette oil bottles containing drug ingredients,

weighing 44.17 grams in total, Ho said.

During a subsequent search of Cayas's residence, Ho said, PJ officers seized three additional bottles of the same type of e-liquid, weighing around 169.22 grams, along with four plastic bottles stained with e-liquid containing the drug, and one e-cigarette device with a cartridge.

Ho said that a total of 213.39 grams of e-liquids containing synthetic cannabinoids were seized, with an estimated street value of around 31,000 patacas.

Cayas has meanwhile been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing charges of drug-trafficking, drug-taking, and possession of drug taking paraphernalia. ■



This undated handout photo provided by the Judiciary Police yesterday shows evidence seized from the Philippine drug suspect.

Macau's health e-vouchers extended to Guangdong

Continued from p.1

The 106-square-kilometre Hengqin island in Zhuhai City is officially known as Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, following its inauguration in September 2021. The adjacent island is three times the size of the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR).

The neighbouring city of Zhuhai is one of the 21 prefecture-level cities in Guangdong Province, which covers 179,800 km² with a population of 127 million.

In Macau, Wong pointed out, the health e-vouchers are only valid for consultations and treatments offered by health professionals in the private sector not subsidised by the local government.

From next month, Wong said, health professionals from Macau eligible to provide health services in the Chinese mainland who

have joined Macau's medical subsidy programme can receive the Macau government-issued health e-vouchers when they are providing consultations and treatments in eligible clinics or outpatient departments of other medical institutions in Guangdong Province. Only clinics, as well as outpatient departments of other medical institutions, in Guangdong established by Macau residents who hold, individually or jointly, shares in the capital are covered by the Macau government's medical subsidy programme, Wong said.

In Macau, beneficiaries can use their health e-vouchers either with their physical ID card or their e-ID card displayed on the Macau government's Macao One Account e-government app.

In Guangdong, however, beneficiaries can only use their health e-vouchers with their e-ID

card displayed on the Macao One Account app, Wong said.

The 2025 round of health e-vouchers, which started on June 1, 2025 and are valid until May 31, 2027, can now also be used in Guangdong.

As previously, the health e-vouchers are fully or partly transferable to the beneficiaries' spouse, parents or children provided that they are permanent residents.

Also addressing yesterday's press conference, Dr Lo said that there are currently 21 clinics and outpatient departments of other medical institutions in Guangdong established by Macau residents who hold, individually or jointly, shares in the capital, 15 of which are located in Hengqin, comprising seven clinics and eight outpatient departments of other medical institutions. ■

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ROBO SPACE showcases AI-powered robotic band, coffee arm

Khalel Vallo

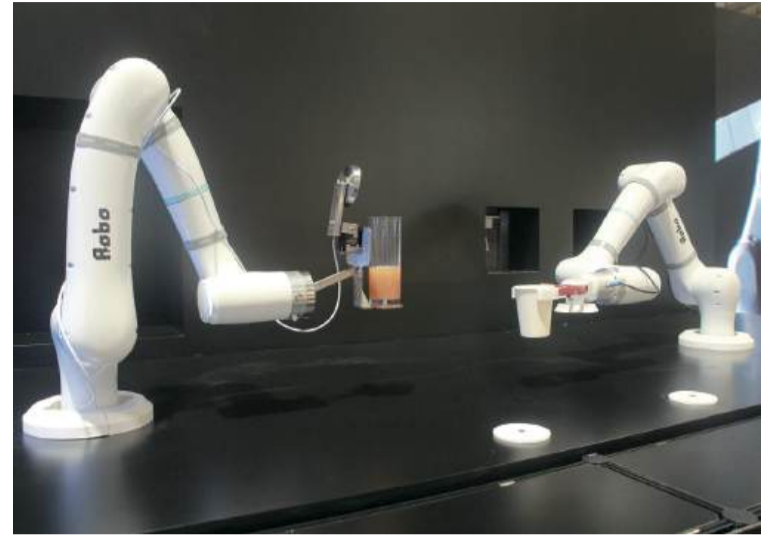
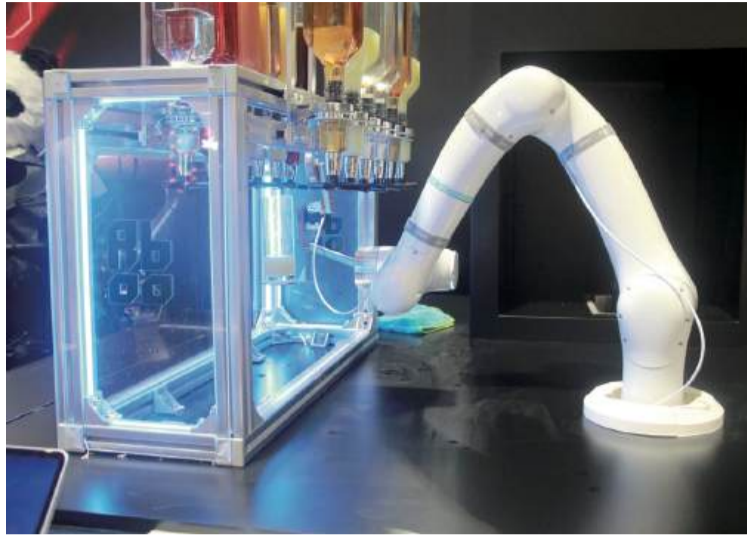
Shanghai-based ROBO SPACE showcased its AI-powered entertainment and hospitality technologies during the three-day G2E Asia + Asian IR Expo at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo, featuring a robot band system and an automated coffee and cocktail-making robotic arm aimed at integrated resorts (IRs) and hotels.

The exhibition concludes today.

Speaking to the *Post* at the exhibition yesterday, ROBO SPACE staff member, who identified himself as Chill, introduced the company's "Robot Band" system, which combines self-developed hardware and software with AI music adaptation technology.

According to the company's flyer, the robot musicians are equipped with wireless remote-control and upgrade functions, while the system delivers a high-precision guitar performance capable of reproducing delicate musical details with up to 1mm precision. The band's leading robot is from the brand Unitree*, Chill pointed out. The flyer adds that the modular quick-change system allows multiple machines to coordinate and switch freely between instruments including drums, keyboards and string instruments, supporting diverse musical performances.

Meanwhile, the company also demonstrated its automated coffee and cocktail robotic arm, which can complete beverage preparation through a fully automated process. "This is a coffee arm. The AI robotic arm can be used as both a bartender and a waiter", Chill said during the demonstration, elaborating that the machine can prepare drinks by automatically selecting ingredients according to customised recipes programmed



ROBO SPACE's "Coffee Arm" prepares a beverage during the three-day G2E Asia + Asian IR Expo at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo yesterday. – Photos: Khalel Vallo

through the company's application system.

"At first, the robotic bartender takes ingredients from the bottles. Different recipes use different ingredients, which can be customised by customers through our application", Chill said.

The flyer points out that the robotic system integrates an espresso machine, automatic tamping system and intelligent milk frothing technology, while supporting one-click production of different coffee beverages, adding that the machine can produce a cup within around 50 seconds.

The flyer also highlights the system's AI latte art function, which allows customised designs and patterns. When asked whether the product had already entered the local market, Chill said the machines are currently only available domestically [in the Chinese mainland]. "At the moment, it is only

available domestically and not yet in Macau. We have not applied for licences in Macau or Hong Kong because policies differ between countries and regions", Chill said, hoping that "organisations such as hotels and resorts will adopt this technology". ■

*Hangzhou-based Unitree Robotics is one of the world's most prominent robotics companies, widely recognised for making high-performance legged robots accessible at consumer and industrial price points. – Gemini

Experts discuss gaming industry's AI governance, sustainable development at G2E Asia

Khalel Vallo

Experts and industry representatives from Macau, the Chinese mainland and overseas gathered at The Venetian Macao integrated resort yesterday for the "Global Gaming AI Governance and Sustainable Development Summit & the 5th Asia Pacific Responsible Gaming Forum", where discussions centred on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in responsible gaming, industry governance and sustainable development.

The forum was held at the Florence Meeting Room of The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo yesterday.

Addressing the forum, Macau Responsible Gaming Association President Billy Song Wai Kit said that AI would become an increasingly important driving force for the industry in the future. "Through the development of AI, there will be better and more stable ways to promote responsible gaming in the future", Song said, adding that technological advancement could help make responsible gaming measures "more stable and more efficient".

He also expressed hope that the forum could contribute to Macau's future economic development alongside the city's ongoing responsible gaming efforts.

Meanwhile, Asian Responsible Gaming Alliance Chairman Prof. Su Guojing said the gaming industry was shifting from "data-driven" operations towards "intelligent governance" amid the rapid growth of generative AI. He called for the establishment of a global AI governance framework to transform "technology for good" into more precise protective measures for gamblers.

Moreover, (RX) Reed Exhibitions Project Director Vera Ng (吳擺芬) said the forum reflected the industry's growing attention towards balancing technological innovation with social responsibility. Ng said the organisers have collaborated with partner organisations for more than a decade, helping promote industry exchange and responsible gaming education in Asia.

Four scholars and experts from different regions delivered keynote speeches during the forum. Su discussed how AI could support



Macau Responsible Gaming Association President Billy Song Wai Kit addresses yesterday's "Global Gaming AI Governance and Sustainable Development Summit & the 5th Asia Pacific Responsible Gaming Forum" at the Florence Meeting Room of The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo. – Photo: Khalel Vallo

Macau's non-gaming development and social governance, while Wayne Gao (高煒), chief AI officer of GENLOT from the Chinese mainland, introduced the "AEGIS" AI system designed for lottery supervision.

Meanwhile, Las Vegas' International Centre for Responsible Gaming (ICRG) Research and Education Director Travis Sztainert explored how neuroscience and AI could be combined to identify behavioural risks in land-based casinos, while Britain's OpenBet Limited Managing Director Michael Auer presented predictive models using big data and personalised "nudging" technology to encourage responsible consumption.

The one-day forum formed part of G2E Asia's programme this year, bringing together academics, gaming professionals and policymakers to examine how AI technologies can support responsible gaming and sustainable development, while strengthening cross-regional cooperation and industry dialogue in Macau. ■

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This photo taken last July shows award-winning director Max Bessmertny (left) and producer Virginia Ho Hoi Ian (centre) posing during the FIRST International Film Festival - Film Industry in Xining, capital of western Qinghai Province. – Photos: The Violin Case team

The Violin Case: from a lost artwork to film premiere

Rui Pastorin

“The Violin Case” is set to make its premiere tomorrow at the Studio City Cinema in Cotai, marking the culmination of continued passion and years of hard work.

A one-night mini-odyssey, it marks the first theatrical feature length film of award-winning director Max Bessmertny, an NYU Tisch School of the Arts graduate who has directed a variety of short films, including 12 set in Macau such as “Tricycle Thief”, “Dirty Laundry” and “The Handover”. Leading the project with him is local producer Virginia Ho Hoi Ian, who has had over 20 years of experience in producing commercials and documentaries, also marking her first film. The *Post* interviewed the duo earlier this week on their journey towards the coming premiere, which could be an odyssey itself.

It started with losing an artwork

The made-in-Macau indie film tells the story of an American painter named Theo who left his painted violin artwork in the back of a cab, and embarked on a desperate search in what can only be described as “the worst night of his life”.

While making for an interesting story, the movie’s plot is actually rooted in a real-life event that took place over 10 years ago, when Bessmertny’s father, veteran artist Konstantin Bessmertny, left his violin artwork in the back of a taxi in Hong Kong. An extensive search by the father and son ensued, but despite concerted efforts, it has never been found. But it laid the foundation for the film’s story, developed over two years before filming began in 2022, with Macau, 42 locations and its multicultural character, as its backdrop.

Bessmertny noted that his favourite part about the film is mixing both a documentary and fictional aspect, highlighting the incident that started it all. “You can’t really get to the truth without exploring fiction. Interestingly enough, when you’re creating fiction, you have to go through documentary evidence, real life, real people. You try and figure out if a certain situation would happen. And then you exaggerate it”, he pointed out.

A question that the pair said they often get asked is what the genre of their film is. “It’s about an artist, but it’s not artsy. Is it a crime? Is it a thriller? Is it a comedy? And we’re always like, well, we’re all of the above”, being a mix of genres and an arthouse film with commercial value, Ho said.

The film’s genres aren’t the only things that are mixed, with a multicultural cast including Kelsey Wilhelm, Clara Brito, Filipe Baptista Tou, Mi Lee, and Nicole Place. Bessmertny and Ho highlighted that for this film, made during the COVID-19 pandemic, they mostly worked with non-actors, along with some brought back from Bessmertny’s previous short films, all chosen for their own unique characteristics and nuances. And while English is its main language, Portuguese and Chinese are also used, along with French and Tagalog.

Contributing to the film’s universe are Macau’s multicultural aspects including as a place that has inhabitants of different nationalities. Ho noted: “This is the universe, this is Macau that we live in. And we try very hard to translate it to cinema, not to sanitise it”, but actually present the city that the character is living in, believing in “mixing reality and imagination”.

Following the completion of the film, a private screening was then held at Galaxy Cinemas in 2023.

Overcoming challenges

The entire project was no easy task, overcoming a variety of challenges over a six-year period, including managing a tight budget and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the duo and the rest of their crew were resilient, taking on a driven, “go-getter” attitude from their 24 long night shoots to post-production in 2023 to the duo eventually finding the right platforms and decisionmakers to pitch to.

Reflecting on the project, Ho noted: “It was so much pressure on us”, especially on her and Bessmertny as they led a project that they were both experiencing for the first time, needing to have all the answers and right decisions. But Bessmertny said that it was something they willingly took on, also highlighting the bond, shared energy and driven attitude that they had with the film’s crew to push through it all. And if given the chance to do it again, both said that they would.

“No matter how hard it was and how hard it affected us emotionally and physically, it’s the



best experience”, Ho said. Bessmertny added: “And it’s meant to be... The greatest decision that we made was, first of all, to shoot it. Second of all, to keep funding it, third to reconnect, and fourth to promote it and then to release it ourselves”, also emerging with key takeaways and lessons for future projects.

The “incredible support” that they received also cannot be understated, the pair pointed out, from the individual film lovers and stakeholders to venue sponsors.

“Even though it was painful, stressful and a rollercoaster for the past six years until now, we actually also got lucky”, Ho said, adding that they had help in a variety of ways: “Some financially, some just donated their time, advice and location. So we had help, also highlighting support from the Cultural Development Fund to attend film markets to promote the film and gain insight into the film industry.

Bessmertny added: “The openness, the willingness to see something rise? This is where you can tell an industry can happen because we have so many stakeholders who are interested in supporting it. And no industry runs on its own. It starts from every other industry as well because that’s cinema. It’s always working with other industries”

From Macau to the world and back

In 2025, Bessmertny and Ho went on to promote and pitch, the 90 minute, film in 10 different film markets and festivals in 12 cities around the world, a period that they described as a valuable time for networking and learning.

Markets “widen your world view”, Bessmertny said, and besides learning more about what was going on in the industry and making connections for the future, these events were also part of what helped the pair figure out how to market the film and find the right people and decision makers to approach, as well as overcome self-doubt and, at times, rejection. But it also helped them craft the film’s positioning.

Going back to the genre question that they constantly get asked, it was through meeting people from the industry and film markets that they eventually learnt to stand in the middle instead of being under a single genre. “We realised it’s also like Macau. We’re not totally Chinese, but we’re also not totally Portuguese. We’re not totally West, not totally East... We’re in the middle. We’re a mix, and maybe that’s okay”, Ho said.

Following tomorrow’s premiere, Bessmertny said the film is scheduled for a limited release at both Studio City Cinema and the Galaxy Macau Cinema starting from May 22, with more details coming soon. A trailer of the movie can be found on: <https://youtu.be/74hoJ1fCbQ>. Meanwhile, the film is also set to be screened overseas, starting with Lisbon on September 11.

Read more on <https://www.macaupostdaily.com/news/28030>

China-Arab cooperation sets model for developing countries to pursue development together

Analysis

BEIJING – A report released yesterday in Cairo by Xinhua Institute reviewed the achievements of China-Arab cooperation and examined future opportunities for both sides. The report comes as China and Arab states continue to expand ties in trade, infrastructure, energy, technology and people-to-people exchanges.

Titled “Achievements, Opportunities, and Prospects of China-Arab Cooperation in the New Era,” the report noted that in response to the global energy transition, China and the Arab states are moving with the trend, positioning new energy cooperation as a new growth driver and gradually forming a pattern characterized by the coordinated development of traditional and renewable energy, as well as mutual empowerment through both technology and projects.

The relationship between China and Arab states has a long history. From the ancient Silk Road to today’s cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, the two sides have maintained close exchanges and mutual support. Over time, China and Arab states have developed the spirit of a friendship featuring solidarity and mutual assistance, equality and mutual benefit, inclusiveness and mutual learning.

In recent years, China-Arab cooperation has achieved concrete results. China has remained the largest trading partner of Arab states for years, while Arab states have actively joined China in Belt and Road cooperation. Cooperation in energy, finance, science and technology, investment and trade has

continued to expand. Educational exchanges, tourism and youth programs have also strengthened ties between their peoples.

Such cooperation has become increasingly important under current international conditions. The world faces rising geopolitical tensions, economic uncertainty and growing instability in some regional hotspots. Against this backdrop, stronger coordination between China and Arab states helps support regional peace and development while contributing to a more open and balanced global economy.

China and Arab states are both important members of the developing world and important forces in international affairs. Both sides support multilateralism and advocate a fairer international order. Their cooperation therefore goes beyond bilateral interests and reflects broader efforts by developing countries to strengthen solidarity and defend common interests.

The year 2026 marks the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Arab states. Looking ahead, both sides are expected to deepen strategic trust, advance high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, expand cultural exchanges and strengthen coordination on regional and global issues.

In an uncertain world, China and Arab states will continue to move forward together on their respective paths toward modernization, advance the building of a China-Arab community with a shared future to a higher level, and make greater contributions to building a community with a shared future for humanity. – Xinhua

Govt urges local jobseekers to join labour market first before pursuing better jobs



Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) Director Chan Un Tong (second from left) speaks during yesterday’s press conference at the bureau’s headquarters in Areia Preta district, as DSAL Deputy Director Chan Tze Wai (second from right), Chan Ka In (right), acting chief of the bureau’s Employment Department, and Lam Sau Heong, who heads the bureau’s Non-resident Workers Employment Department, look on.

– Photo: Tony Wong

Tony Wong

The Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) held a press conference yesterday to brief the media about Macau’s latest data on local residents’ employment and statistics concerning non-resident workers (NRWs), for the first quarter of this year.

The DSAL officials acknowledged that Macau is affected by a job market mismatch where young local jobseekers generally prefer office jobs with stable working hours, but employers in the city need workers for blue-collar positions and frontline operational positions requiring shift work.

The DSAL officials also urged local jobseekers to join the labour market first in order to obtain the necessary work experience before seeking a better or more suitable job.

The officials also pledged that the local government will implement measures to ensure that local jobseekers will always be

prioritised for positions available in the local employment market as long as they are willing to take the positions and are capable of them.

The press conference was held at the bureau’s headquarters in Areia Preta district.

The officials noted that according to official data, local residents’ unemployment rate stood at 2.1 percent in the first quarter of this year, the lowest on record.

Macau’s general unemployment rate comprises local residents and non-resident workers.

Macau recorded 183,179 non-resident workers (NRWs) by the end of March this year, with the number of unskilled workers decreasing by 1,546 year-on-year.

The bureau announced a slew of labour market data during the press conference:

The total number of NRWs comprised 6,255 skilled workers, 148,133 unskilled workers, and 28,791 domestic helpers.

According to the bureau, skilled NRWs are being recruited

primarily to supplement local talent, specifically targeting roles such as university professors, executives, and network systems engineers within the education, entertainment and gaming, hospitality, and catering sectors.

In contrast, unskilled NRWs fill roles for which there is little interest from local residents, such as cleaning, security, construction, catering, and room service, among others, the officials said.

The officials underlined that the total number of NRWs remained virtually unchanged compared to the same period last year. They also said that the bureau assisted nearly 2,800 residents in finding employment during the first quarter of this year.

The officials insisted that the employment sector has remained stable. In 2025, more than 11,500 job placements were made, and nearly 80 percent of those benefiting from the placements remained employed during the subsequent follow-up period. ■

Arabic edition of Volume I of ‘China’s Governance Under Xi Jinping’s Leadership’ launched in Cairo



President of Xinhua News Agency Fu Hua addresses the global launch of the Arabic edition of the first volume of “China’s Governance Under Xi Jinping’s Leadership,” which is part of the Global South Media and Think Tank Forum Chinese-Arab Partnership Conference, in the Egyptian capital Cairo yesterday.

– Xinhua

CAIRO – The global launch of the Arabic edition of the first volume of “China’s Governance Under Xi Jinping’s Leadership” was held in Cairo yesterday.

President of Xinhua News Agency Fu Hua, former Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, Chinese Ambassador to Egypt Liao Liqiang, and Director-General of the Union of News Agencies of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Muhammad bin Abd Rabbo Al-Yami jointly unveiled the new book.

The global launch was part of the two-day Global South Media and Think Tank Forum Chinese-Arab Partnership Conference, which opened on Tuesday and gathered about 250 representatives from around 110 media outlets, think tanks, government institutions, and enterprises from China and Arab countries, as well as from international and regional organizations.

Addressing the event, Fu said that

since the beginning of the new era, Xinhua has provided extensive coverage of the extraordinary practices and remarkable achievements of Xi’s governance of China.

Based on these reports, Xinhua has compiled and published “China’s Governance Under Xi Jinping’s Leadership,” introducing to the world China’s approach to governance and the philosophy behind it, he said, adding that the launch of the Arabic edition will open an important new window for the Arab world to observe and better understand China.

Xinhua, Fu said, looks forward to strengthening cooperation with Arab media outlets and think tanks in research, interpretation, and presentation on major issues related to state governance, with a view to sharing experience and insights for national development and state building, and contributing greater wisdom

and strength to solidarity, cooperation, and common development across the Global South.

Participants of the event said the launch of the Arabic edition provides an important reference for the Arab world to gain a deeper understanding of Xi’s thoughts on governance and China’s development achievements in the new era.

They said it will help enhance mutual understanding and trust between China and Arab countries, deepen exchanges on governance experience, and build a broader consensus for and inject stronger momentum into building a higher-level China-Arab community with a shared future.

At the event, Xinhua also released a think tank report titled “Achievements, Opportunities, and Prospects of China-Arab Cooperation in the New Era” and a publication titled “Decoding the Buzzwords of the Global South.” – Xinhua

Interactions between heads of state provide irreplaceable strategic guidance for China-US ties: Amb. Xie

Interview

WASHINGTON – Interactions between the heads of state provide irreplaceable strategic guidance for China-US relations, Xie Feng, Chinese ambassador to the United States, has said.

Xie made the remarks in a recent interview with *Newsweek* on US President Donald Trump's visit to China and China-US relations, noting that in an increasingly turbulent world, the strategic value of China-US relations becomes more prominent.

In the interview, Xie said President Xi Jinping and President Trump respect each other, and have maintained close communication, and that since last year, the two leaders have spoken on the phone five times and exchanged multiple letters, and held a successful meeting in Busan, the Republic of Korea, recalibrating the course of the China-US relationship and steering it toward overall stability.

He expressed hope that with the joint efforts of both sides, the meeting between the two heads of state in Beijing would chart the right course for the future development of China-US relations, and pave the way for making the list of dialogue and cooperation longer and advancing the positive agenda, while shortening the list of problems and properly managing differences.

That would not only promote the steady, sound and sustainable development of bilateral relations this year, but also explore a right way for China and the United States to get along in the new era based on mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation, said Xie.

History has proven it once and again that a tariff war or trade war produces no winner, damages the interests of both sides, and hurts the whole world, Xie said, noting that under the guidance of the two leaders, China and the United States have reached a series of common understandings through economic and trade consultations, and have stabilized bilateral economic and trade relations.

This has not come easily and should be cherished, but it is still far from enough, Xie said, expressing hopes that the US side will move further ahead, and completely remove

the unilateral tariffs and other restrictive measures.

On the Taiwan question, Xie said that he believed the American people, who faced the danger of division and had a Civil War in history, can understand China's will and determination to safeguard national unity.

The Chinese side urges the US side to commit to the one-China principle, the three China-US joint communiqués with concrete actions, make the right choice as early as possible, fundamentally remove the biggest obstacle to China-US relations, which is the Taiwan question, a burden that risks dragging the two countries into confrontation and conflict, and open up broader room for developing bilateral ties, Xie said.

When asked about the fentanyl issue, Xie said the fentanyl crisis in the United States was not created by China, but China has been doing its utmost to provide assistance with the greatest goodwill out of humanitarian spirit and for the sake of China-US friendship.

He urged the US side to appreciate and cherish China's goodwill, view bilateral cooperation outcomes in a just manner, stop shifting the blame for the fentanyl issue, avoid imposing alternative tariffs as substitutes for fentanyl-related tariffs, and remove China from the list of so-called "major drug source countries" as soon as possible.

On artificial intelligence (AI), Xie said that the world does not want to see an "Iron Curtain" in AI, nor attempts at technological enclosure, let alone a Star Wars-style rivalry in AI.

Xie expressed hope that the US side would work with China in the same direction to enhance dialogue, manage competition and conduct cooperation, so that AI could become a new frontier for China-US cooperation and a new ladder for human progress.

Speaking of the growing tendency among people in Western countries to view Chinese culture as fashionable, Xie said that both the "Becoming Chinese" trend that emerged at the end of last year and "Chinamaxxing"* this year reflect the growing eagerness of the two peoples to reach out to one another.

The Chinese side welcomes more

American students to study in China, and more American people to take advantage of China's 240-hour visa-free transit policy and online visa application system to travel to China and have a wonderful journey, Xie said.

Xie also expressed hope that the US side would remove bottlenecks in visa application and border entry for Chinese citizens as soon as possible, stop taking selective and

discriminatory measures toward Chinese visitors, and further increase direct flights, so as to further unlock the potential of people-to-people exchanges.

— Xinhua
* *Chinamaxxing* is a term – stemming from internet "maxxing" culture – that describes the process of leaning into a Chinese lifestyle, aesthetic, or geopolitical alignment. – Gemini/MPD

Chinese Embassy in US @ChineseEmbinUS · 19h

The four red lines in #China-#US relations must not be challenged.
#ChinaUSRelations #ChinaDiplomacy

#China - #US 關係中的四條紅線不容置疑。
#ChinaUSRelations #ChinaDiplomacy

CHINESE EMBASSY IN THE U.S.

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THE FOUR RED LINES
— IN CHINA-U.S. RELATIONS —
— They must not be challenged. —

01 THE TAIWAN QUESTION

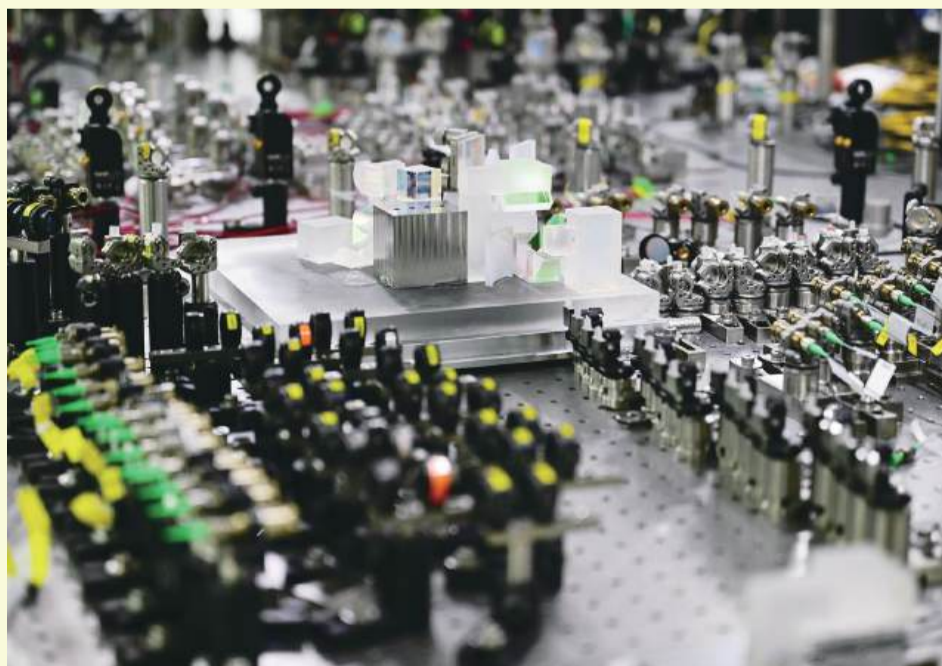
02 DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

03 PATHS AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS

04 CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT RIGHT

<http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/>

Scientists develop 'Jiuzhang 4.0', setting new world record in quantum computing



This photo taken on April 10 shows part of a programmable quantum computing prototype called "Jiuzhang 4.0". Chinese scientists have developed a programmable quantum computing prototype called "Jiuzhang 4.0" that has set a new world record for optical quantum information technology, according to a study published yesterday in the journal *Nature*. — Xinhua

HEIFEI – Chinese scientists have developed a programmable quantum computing prototype called "Jiuzhang 4.0" that has set a new world record for optical quantum information technology, according to a study published yesterday in the journal *Nature*.

Led by the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), the team used the prototype to solve the Gaussian boson sampling problem at a speed more than 10 to the 54th times that of the world's most powerful supercomputer, the study said.

The researchers said they manipulated and detected quantum states of up to 3,050 photons – a significant leap from the 255 photons achieved with the previous "Jiuzhang 3.0."

Current mainstream quantum computing technological routes include superconducting, ion trap, photonic, and neutral atom systems. The "Jiuzhang" series of prototypes encodes quantum bits using photons and performs quantum computation through the manipulation and measurement of these photons.

Since its successful construction in 2020, the series has undergone several upgrades,

achieving "quantum computational advantage" and repeatedly setting world records.

Lu Chaoyang, a professor at the USTC, said the research team developed a high-efficiency optical parametric oscillator light source and a spatiotemporally hybrid-coded interferometer.

By integrating 1,024 high-efficiency squeezed-state optical fields into an 8,176-mode spatiotemporally hybrid-coded circuit, the team was able to manipulate and detect up to 3,050 photons.

"This means that the most complex data sample generated by 'Jiuzhang 4.0' takes only 25 microseconds to produce – shorter than the blink of an eye. In contrast, the world's most powerful supercomputer would require more than 10 to the 42nd years to calculate the same result," Lu said.

Lu noted that the results from "Jiuzhang 4.0" represent a major leap in the scale and complexity of low-loss photonic quantum processors, offering new possibilities for constructing "trillion-qubit-mode three-dimensional cluster states" and future "fault-tolerant optical quantum computing hardware." — AFP

China ready to work with US in spirit of equality, respect and mutual benefit

China Daily Editorial

While global turbulence does not always stem from shifts in major-country relations, stable and healthy ties between the world's two largest economies can help facilitate the easing of international turmoil as their intertwined economic relationship is a stabilizer for the world economy.

Under such circumstances, US President Donald Trump's state visit to China from yesterday to tomorrow has naturally attracted wide attention as head-of-state diplomacy plays an irreplaceable and strategically vital role in guiding China-US ties.

As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said yesterday, China welcomes Trump's visit, during which the two leaders will have in-depth exchanges of views on key issues concerning bilateral ties and global peace and development.

The Sino-US economic and trade consultations held in the Republic of Korea yesterday also serve to highlight the two sides' commitment to managing their differences through dialogue and negotiation. The candid, in-depth and constructive exchanges on economic and trade issues of mutual concern, as well as on further expanding practical cooperation, carry on the momentum of the previous six rounds of talks and show the complementarity of Sino-US economic ties.

It is precisely this pragmatism that – despite their differences – has enabled practical cooperation between China and the United States to continue demonstrating vitality and potential under the guidance of head-of-state diplomacy over the past years – even in the face of attempts by some to derail it.

The business delegation led by Trump on his visit to China, which consists of business leaders of some big-name companies in a wide range of strategic sectors, including semiconductors, finance and artificial intelligence, further illustrates the willingness of the US business community to expand mutually beneficial cooperation with China.

The two countries possess broad space for cooperation in fields such as AI, health, green development, advanced manufacturing and supply-chain stability during China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period and beyond.

Experience has proved that China and the US stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation. It is imperative that they strengthen their dialogue and cooperation in strategic sectors, particularly AI governance. The initiative on AI governance Beijing has put forward reflects China's commitment to promoting international cooperation on AI governance and ensuring that the

era-defining technology benefits all humanity.

China's cooperative spirit is embodied in its four global initiatives – the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative and the Global Governance Initiative.

These initiatives underpin the country's international engagement across key areas, including its major-country diplomacy with the US. The four global initiatives respond to the common aspirations of the international community for peace, development, fairness, justice and mutual respect. And they are public goods China has contributed to advance world peace and development.

China does not seek spheres of influence, ideological confrontation or cliques. It should be clear that no country can address the grave global challenges the world faces today on its own, no matter how strong it is. Still less can any country achieve security through confrontation or "decoupling", not to mention at the cost of others' security or crossing others' red lines.

China supports multilateralism and an open world economy. Such concepts are rooted not only in China's diplomatic practices, but also in the principles of the modern international order established after World War II, including sovereign equality, peaceful coexistence and multilateral cooperation.

The world does not need a new Cold War – it needs peace and development achieved through dialogue and cooperation, grounded in responsible major-country diplomacy. When China and the US work together to promote peace, development and win-win cooperation, they serve not only their shared interests but also those of the entire world. Against this backdrop, Trump's visit to China has raised expectations that, even with their differences, China and the US can still engage in candid communication, expand practical cooperation and jointly shoulder responsibilities for global peace and development.

As Guo said in reply to questions about the first visit by a US president in nine years, China stands ready to work with the US in the spirit of equality, respect and mutual benefit – expanding cooperation and managing differences – so as to bring greater stability and certainty to the world.

The more volatile the world situation becomes, the more major countries should work together to function as stabilizers. China is willing to work with all countries, including the US, to strengthen communication, properly manage differences and deepen win-win cooperation.

– Courtesy of China Daily

Trump arrives in China for summit with Xi

BEIJING – US President Donald Trump landed in Beijing shortly before 8 p.m. yesterday for a summit with President Xi Jinping.

Giving a fist pump, Trump descended the steps of Air Force One after touching down at Beijing Capital International Airport, kicking off the first visit to China by a US president in nearly a decade.

Right behind him were Tesla boss Elon Musk and Nvidia chief Jensen Huang (黄仁勳) – potent symbols of the business deals that Trump hopes to sign between the world's biggest economies.

Trump was greeted with a bunch of flowers and then walked along the red carpet, which was lined with 300 young Chinese in white uniforms chanting "welcome" and waving small national and US flags in unison.

While en route to Beijing, Trump said on social media he would "be asking President Xi, a Leader of extraordinary distinction, to 'open up' China so that these brilliant people can work their magic".

Nvidia's Huang was a surprise late addition to the trip, joining the plane at a stopover in Alaska. China is currently banned under US national security rules from buying the cutting-edge AI chips that the company produces.

But Iran, trade and Taiwan loom over the highly anticipated meeting, which Trump had already delayed from March because of the war the United States and Israel started in the Middle East.

China 'welcomes' Trump visit

Visiting China for the first time since 2017 during his previous term, Trump is expected to receive a warm welcome from his Chinese hosts.

Trump and Xi will start formal talks at 10 a.m. today in Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

The US president will also visit the historic Temple of Heaven, a



Vice President Han Zheng (centre) smiles as US President Donald Trump (right) receives a bouquet of flowers from a girl upon arrival at Beijing Capital Airport last night. – AFP

world heritage site where China's emperors once prayed for good harvest.

The leaders will then enjoy a state banquet in the evening. Tomorrow, they are set to have tea and a working lunch before Trump heads home.

As he departed the White House, Trump said he expected a "long talk" with Xi about the joint US-Israeli war with Iran, which sells most of its US-sanctioned oil to China.

But he also downplayed disagreements, telling reporters that "I don't think we need any help with Iran" from China and that Xi had been "relatively good" on the topic.

The foreign ministry in Beijing said yesterday it "welcomes" Trump's visit and that "China stands ready to work with the United States... to expand cooperation and manage differences".

Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged his Pakistani counterpart on

Tuesday to step up mediation efforts between Iran and the United States.

'Big deal'

The long-simmering trade war between the two countries will also be top of the agenda, after Trump's sweeping tariffs last year triggered tit-for-tat levies that exceeded 100 percent.

Trump and Xi are set to discuss extending a one-year tariff truce, which the two leaders reached during their last meeting in South Korea in October.

China's policies on rare earth and agriculture exports are also expected to be on the menu.

"It's definitely a big deal," said Wen Wen, a 24-year-old woman travelling from the eastern city of Nanjing, when asked by AFP about Trump's visit.

Trump has repeatedly touted a strong personal relationship with Xi. – AFP, MPD



US President Donald Trump (centre) is escorted by Vice President Han Zheng (right) upon arrival at Beijing Capital Airport last night. – Xinhua

Shots heard at Philippine Senate as lawmaker wanted by ICC holds out

MANILA – Multiple gunshots sent Philippine senators into hiding in their offices late yesterday, after a legislator wanted by the International Criminal Court sought refuge in the legislative building, AFP journalists said.

At least five shots rang out, AFP journalists inside the Senate said, minutes after soldiers with rifles and protective gear went up the stairs of the building.

Interior Secretary Juanito Victor Remulla told reporters there were no casualties, adding that the search for the gunmen was ongoing.

The dramatic scene unfolded as Senator Ronald Dela Rosa – former president Rodrigo Duterte’s top enforcer during his bloody drug war – holed up in the Senate complex to dodge arrest and transfer to the Netherlands over alleged crimes against humanity.

The fugitive senator remains inside the building, said Remulla, who arrived on the scene minutes after the gunfire.

“I am here to ensure the integrity of the Senate and the protection of all the senators,” Remulla said.

He added that Dela Rosa “is safe. He is with security personnel. He has been informed of our activities. We have assured him that there is no warrant of arrest to be served.”

Earlier yesterday, Dela Rosa had appealed to the military to oppose attempts to detain him, urging former colleagues to resist any move by President Ferdinand Marcos’s government to hand him over to the ICC.

“My fellow men in uniform” should “express their sentiment” that the government “should not hand me over to foreigners”, he said.

‘Under attack’

The Supreme Court, meanwhile, ordered the government yesterday to reply within three days to Dela



Protesters carrying a banner reading “Sara (Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte) take responsibility, arrest Bato” (the nickname of Senator Ronald dela Rosa) march towards the Senate in Manila yesterday. – AFP

Rosa’s petition to bar authorities from arresting and handing him over to the ICC.

Senate President Alan Peter Cayetano, who had barred government agents from arresting his ally Dela Rosa, said on his official Facebook page he did not know who had fired the shots.

“We heard gunshots and we don’t know what is happening. Everyone’s locked in their rooms now. We cannot go out, we cannot secure our other staff,” he added.

“Why are we under attack here?”

Melvin Matibag, director of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) whose agents had attempted to arrest Dela Rosa at the Senate on Monday, denied that his officers had fired their guns.

“We were on a stand down,” he told ABS-CBN network in an interview, adding there were no NBI agents inside the Senate when the shooting occurred.

A television journalist was seen crying as she reported live from inside the building, while another

senator, Robin Padilla, urged reporters to evacuate.

Dela Rosa, known as “Bato”, served as national police chief from 2016 to 2018 during the early phase of Duterte’s anti-drug campaign.

The crackdown left thousands dead, many of them drug users and low-level narcotics peddlers, according to human rights monitors.

Duterte was arrested in March last year, flown to the Netherlands on the same day, and is detained in The Hague awaiting trial.

Dela Rosa had not been seen publicly since November before emerging on Monday to take part in an unexpected vote that helped Duterte loyalists capture control of the Senate.

No order given to arrest Dela Rosa

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos yesterday said that the government did not order Dela Rosa’s arrest, vowing to identify those who tried to enter the Senate complex, according to local media reports. – AFP/Xinhua

Japan’s ‘robot wolves’ in high demand to scare off bears

TOKYO – A Japanese company making ferocious-looking robot wolves is being swamped by orders after record numbers of fatal bear attacks on humans last year.

“Monster Wolf” is an animatronic scarecrow with flashing red eyes that howls and growls menacingly to scare away wild animals.

Ohta Seiki, the Hokkaido-based firm that makes the devices, has already received around 50 orders this year, more than the usual volume for an entire year.

“We make them by hand. We cannot make them fast enough now. We are asking our customers to wait two to three months,” company president Yuji Ohta told AFP.

“Awareness of bear safety and measures against wildlife damage (on farm products) improved. There was also a growing recognition that our product is effective in dealing with bears,” Ohta said.

Orders come mostly from farmers, operators of golf courses and people working outside in rural areas such as in construction.

Bears killed 13 people across Japan in 2025-2026, more than twice the previous high.

More than 50,000 bear sightings were recorded nationwide, more than double the previous record set two years before, according to official data.

The animals were seen entering homes, roaming near schools and rampaging through supermarkets and hot spring resorts on an almost

daily basis.

The number of bears captured and then culled nearly tripled from a year earlier to 14,601, also marking an all-time high.

Some northern regions also reported in April more than four times as many sightings as last year as the animals emerge from hibernation, local media said.

“Monster Wolf” features artificial fur draped over an assembled pipe frame, attached to speakers, topped with a menacing, open-mouthed face.

For prices starting from around US\$4,000 or higher, the system comes with a battery, solar panels, sensors, speakers and other apparatus.

It broadcasts more than 50 kinds of recorded sounds, including human voices and electronic noises, audible up to one kilometre away.

The device turns its head from side to side, flashes red LED eyes, while its tail is equipped with blue LEDs.

Ohta introduced the product in 2016 to prevent damage to agricultural products by deer, boars and bears, and it was initially derided as a gimmick.

The company is now upgrading the device by putting it on wheels to chase animals or patrol specific paths.

Ohta also plans to develop a hand-held version for hikers, anglers and schoolchildren, while also exploring artificial intelligence cameras for future models.

“We wanted to apply our manufacturing to do our part to deal with bears,” he said. – AFP



A wolf-like robot “Super Monster Wolf” stands beside a rice field to drive away wild animals that cause damage to crops in Kisarazu, Chiba prefecture, Japan, on August 25, 2017. – AFP

Thai registry listing of disputed border temples draws Cambodia ire

PHNOM PENH – Thailand’s addition of several temple ruins, which it took control of during deadly border clashes with Cambodia last year, to its registry of ancient monuments drew the ire of its neighbour yesterday.

The two Southeast Asian nations have disputed the demarcation of their 800-kilometre border and repeatedly fought over a smattering of centuries-old temple sites for decades, a legacy of the French colonial era.

The long-standing conflict erupted into fighting in July and December that killed dozens of people and left some temples claimed by both sides under Thai control.

Cambodia’s culture ministry yesterday called on Thailand to withdraw its “unlawful registration” of the temples of

Tamone, Ta Krabey and K’nar, and other archaeological sites, located on their disputed border.

In Thailand, the three temples are known as Ta Muen, Ta Kwai and Nong Khana, among nine sites that Thailand added to its official registry for “the sake of clarity in protecting ancient monuments”, an announcement in the royal gazette said on Monday.

Cambodia’s culture ministry said it “considers this registration an unlawful attempt to create an artificial legal appearance over cultural sites situated within the sovereign territory of the Kingdom of Cambodia”, according to a statement.

Before five days of border clashes in July, the disputed temples of Ta Krabey and Tamone hosted both Cambodian and Thai troops, while K’nar temple was controlled

by Cambodians until December, when Thai forces gained control of all three sites.

Last month, Thai officials, soldiers and monks held a Buddhist ceremony at Ta Krabey – also known as Ta Kwai – drawing a rebuke from Cambodia over its neighbour’s “continued unlawful presence” at the temple site.

Thai forces captured several areas in border provinces last year, territory that both sides claim.

Cambodia has repeatedly demanded their withdrawal and slammed Thailand over damage to several heritage temples sustained during the fighting.

The two countries signed a fragile ceasefire agreement in late December, but tensions remain, with both sides trading accusations of truce violations. – AFP

Indonesia to review visa waivers after foreign scammers’ arrests

JAKARTA – Indonesia will review its visa-free entry policy for nationals of Southeast Asian countries after a string of arrests of foreigners accused of running illegal gambling and scam operations, a top immigration official said yesterday.

Authorities last week detained more than 500 people in two separate raids on an online gambling ring in the capital Jakarta and a scamming syndicate in Batam, in eastern Riau Islands province.

Those arrested were nationals of Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos and Myanmar, which all enjoy 30-day visa-free stays in Indonesia, as well as China, which is not included in the waiver scheme.

Indonesian immigration boss

Hendarsam Marantoko said the illicit activities were cause for “serious concern”.

“Cases of foreigners involved in illegal activities, including those coming from countries granted visa-free entry facilities, give rise to (a need for) evaluation” of policies, he said in a statement.

Investigators have found that many of those allegedly involved in the illegal gambling centre in Jakarta had entered Indonesia using visa waivers or applied for permits on arrival.

In recent weeks, immigration authorities have carried out more than 6,700 “administrative actions” including more than 2,000 deportations and cancellations of stay permits, Hendarsam said. – AFP

Researchers in Australia develop fridge-free malaria vaccine

SYDNEY – Researchers in Australia have developed a next-generation malaria vaccine that requires no refrigeration and shows strong potential to provide long-lasting protection and reduce transmission by mosquitoes.

The vaccine is predicted to be low-cost, and its cold-chain independence strongly enhances its deployability, said a statement of Australia's Griffith University released yesterday.

Malaria kills more than 500,000 people each year, mostly in developing countries where vaccine storage and distribution remain major challenges.

"Existing vaccines offer only partial and short-lived protection and are difficult to distribute across the globe as they require strict refrigeration," said Griffith University Professor Bernd Rehm, whose team led the vaccine development.

The vaccine remained stable and effective for at least one month

at temperatures up to 37 degrees Celsius, removing the need for cold-chain logistics and improving access in rural and remote areas, said the study published in the journal *Small*.

"It attacks two critical stages at once – before infection and during transmission by stopping the parasite from reaching and infecting the liver, and also by preventing parasites from developing inside mosquitoes and spreading to others," Rehm said.

The vaccine uses engineered bacterial particles, acting like a scaffold to display key malaria proteins, training the immune system to recognize and destroy the parasite, researchers said.

Preclinical results showed the vaccine reduced liver infection by up to 80 percent, completely protected about a quarter of recipients, and cut mosquito transmission by roughly two-thirds, with immunity lasting at least six months. – *Xinhua*

Singapore's PM calls for balance between AI safety, innovation

SINGAPORE – Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday called for a balance between safety and innovation in regulating artificial intelligence (AI), warning that the technology is advancing faster than legal systems can adapt.

"We must strike the right balance – between safety and progress, between control and creativity," Wong said at SGLaw200 Youth Forum, adding that societies were already facing the consequences of AI misuse through sophisticated scams, deepfakes and misinformation.

"These are not hypothetical risks. They are already here," he said.

He added that more difficult questions would emerge as AI systems become more deeply embedded in areas such as healthcare and autonomous vehicles.

He cited examples including wrong medical diagnoses and

fatal self-driving car incidents, questioning who should be held accountable when AI systems cause harm.

"Is it the developer who built it, the one who wrote the algorithms, the company that deployed the machine, or the person who used it?" he asked.

Wong said existing legal frameworks were not designed for a world where machines can make consequential decisions, and governments would need to rethink issues surrounding responsibility, liability and accountability.

"Again, this will not be easy. Move too slowly, and the law falls behind while people potentially get hurt. Move too quickly and we risk stifling innovation," he said.

Despite rapid technological advances, he stressed that justice and fairness must ultimately remain matters of human judgment rather than algorithms. – *Xinhua*

Poor planning fuels Bangladesh contraceptive crisis

Sheikh Sabiha Alam

DHAKA – Bangladesh's once-praised family planning system is buckling under severe contraceptive shortages, raising fears of a rise in unplanned pregnancies in one of the world's most densely populated countries.

For decades, the South Asian nation was hailed as a success for slashing birth rates through an expansive state-backed family planning programme that sent field workers door to door with pills, condoms and advice on birth spacing.

But that system is now faltering, with government clinics across the country of 170 million people running out of basic contraceptives after procurement failures and administrative disruption left supplies depleted in nearly a third of districts.

"We haven't had supplies of condoms for the last four to five months," said Ahmed Bin Sultan, 33, a family planning officer at the Savar Upazila Health Complex in Dhaka.

"We are continuously requesting service seekers to buy them from dispensaries."

The centre is barely functioning, like most government-run facilities that have offered nearly free family planning services to underprivileged people for decades.

Bin Sultan oversees a population of 100,000 in Savar, many of them workers in the country's key garment manufacturing sector.

Condoms, oral pills, emergency contraceptive pills, intrauterine devices (IUDs) and injectables were unavailable at around a third of the country's 64 districts, according to government figures for May.

Stocks in other districts are also running low.

Tamanna, 22, a mother of two, comes to the Savar centre for pills – but must return every month.

"They used to give three to four sachets of pills, but that has been reduced," said the domestic worker, who gave only one name.

"And taking time off work on weekdays is difficult."

'Mismanagement'

Public health expert Be-Nazir Ahmed said the impact was wider than contraception alone, pointing



This photograph taken on April 27 shows Tahmina (right), a family welfare officer giving birth control pills to a woman at the Savar Upazila Health Complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh. – AFP

to an ongoing measles outbreak due to a failure to vaccinate. Some 400 children have died since mid-March.

"The measles outbreak, shortages of rabies vaccines and now the family planning commodity crisis are all results of mismanagement," he said.

Officials and researchers warn the crisis could reverse decades of progress.

Bangladesh's fertility rate recently began rising for the first time in years, in what insiders describe as a stagnating family planning programme.

Family planning was once taboo in the Muslim-majority country. But beginning in the 1970s, thousands of field workers went door to door discussing marital health, birth spacing and contraceptive options.

"Family planning in Bangladesh was once almost like a social movement," said Tahmina, 54, a family welfare official who uses one name.

"When I started in 1992, people would secretly come to collect pills and condoms."

In 1975, the total fertility rate was 6.3 children per woman. Within 30 years, it had dropped to 3.0, and by 2022 it stood at 2.3.

It has now risen to 2.4, according to UN data.

Officials blame shifting priorities and procurement delays, which increased during and after the chaos of a 2024 uprising that overthrew the country's autocratic government.

"We failed to procure birth control commodities in 2024 due to administrative setbacks," a senior official said, requesting anonymity.

"From 2024 to 2026, we also failed to convince the government that the shortage had reached a critical level."

Lost momentum

Part of the rise also resulted from the suspension of family planning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But Mohammad Bellal Hossain, population science professor at the University of Dhaka, also pointed to years of declining political attention to population policy under ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

"It seemed to lose momentum when we saw Sheikh Hasina attend the population council meeting only once in 17 years," Hossain said.

A new government was elected in February, but continued shortages have forced clinics to turn away couples or steer them towards whatever methods remain available.

Abortion pills require a prescription, but many pharmacies often sell them without one, contributing to widespread use without proper medical guidance.

"We are receiving patients with post-abortion complications," said Kishwar Imdad, country director of Marie Stopes Bangladesh.

He said the charity's family planning programme in remote areas "was halted in 2024 due to the shortage of commodities", and that "the supply chain has still not been restored".

Mohammad Abdul Kalam, the director of family planning in Bangladesh's health ministry, sought to allay fears over supplies.

"We have secured supplies of oral pills and condoms, and they will start reaching the centres by June," Kalam told AFP.

"However, restoring the supply chain will take some more time. By August, there should be no shortage." – AFP

3 pastors gunned down in India's restive northeast

NEW DELHI – Three pastors were gunned down yesterday in India's restive northeastern Manipur state, police and officials said, the latest flare-up in a region gripped by ethnic conflict.

Manipur has seen periodic clashes for nearly three years between the predominantly Hindu Meitei majority and the mainly Christian Kuki minority, in which more than 250 people have been killed.

The pastors belonged to the Kuki community but the identity of the gunmen was not immediately known.

"Three Kuki pastors were killed

today morning [yesterday morning] but the identity of the perpetrators is unknown so far," a senior police official told AFP on condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to media.

Four others were wounded, Manipur chief minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh said in a statement.

"I vehemently condemn the dastardly terror act... which resulted in the death of three innocent civilians," he said.

Kuki groups have blamed an armed faction said to represent the interests of the Naga tribe, another major community in the state.

Like the Kukis, the Nagas are primarily Christian, but tensions between the two groups have escalated in recent months, signalling a widening of the conflict.

The Kuki Inpi, the community's apex body, condemned the killings as "barbaric".

The Nagas and the Kukis have competing claims of their respective ethnic homelands in the hills of Manipur, leading to frequent conflicts.

In 1993, clashes between the two groups erupted into widespread ethnic violence that killed hundreds and displaced entire villages. – AFP



Families of Pakistani crew members of an oil tanker seized by pirates in Somalia demonstrate during a protest near Karachi Port Trust (KPT) in Karachi, Pakistan yesterday, urging the government to ensure the safe return of their loved ones. – AFP

Lebanon says Israeli strikes on cars kill 12

BEIRUT – Israel intensified strikes on Lebanon yesterday with the health ministry reporting 12 people killed in attacks targeting cars, mostly south of Beirut, despite a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah.

The fresh raids, which also targeted various areas of the country's south, came on the eve of a new round of direct negotiations between Lebanon and Israel in Washington brokered by the United States, as Hezbollah remains strongly opposed to the move.

Lebanon's health ministry said three strikes on cars along or near the coastal highway around 20 to 30 kilometres from capital Beirut "resulted in eight martyrs, including two children".

Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) said two strikes hit cars on the busy highway linking Beirut to the country's south, while a third struck nearby.

An AFP photographer saw a burnt-out car and rescuers carrying a body at one of the sites, near Jiyeh.

A fourth strike hit a car in Sidon, southern Lebanon's largest city, around 40 kilometres south of Beirut, with the health ministry reporting one dead there.

The ministry also said Israeli

strikes on another three cars in south Lebanon's Tyre district killed three more people.

Under the terms of the April 17 ceasefire released by Washington, Israel reserves the right to act against "planned, imminent or ongoing attacks".

Drone attacks

Israeli attacks since the ceasefire have killed more than 400 people in Lebanon, according to an AFP tally of health ministry figures.

Israel's army said it struck Hezbollah infrastructure, weapons storage facilities and rocket launchers in south Lebanon yesterday.

The NNA reported strikes on several south Lebanon locations, including in the Tyre district.

An AFP correspondent saw thick smoke from Burj al-Shemali, one of nine areas where Israel's army issued evacuation warnings on Wednesday.

Hezbollah claimed several attacks on Israeli troops who have invaded southern Lebanon, including with drones, and said its fighters "ambushed" and clashed with Israeli forces in one area.

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) said it was "increasingly concerned"



This photo released by United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) on their Flickr account yesterday shows a UNIFIL forensic investigation team examining remnants gathered from a drone crash at the mission's headquarters in Naqoura on Monday. UNIFIL said it was "increasingly concerned" about the activities of Hezbollah fighters and Israeli soldiers near UN positions in south Lebanon. That includes "the increased use of drones, which has resulted in explosions in and around our bases and put peacekeepers at risk", a UNIFIL statement said. – AFP

about the activities of Hezbollah fighters and Israeli soldiers near UN positions in south Lebanon.

That includes "the increased use of drones, which has resulted in explosions in and around our bases and put peacekeepers at risk", a UNIFIL statement said.

It noted several incidents in recent days in which drones

presumed to belong to Hezbollah detonated in or near UN positions, including the force's Naqura headquarters.

Hezbollah has increasingly been using cheap fibre-optic drones for its attacks on Israeli forces.

Civil defence funeral

In Sidon, an AFP correspondent

saw dozens of mourners at the funeral for two Lebanese civil defence personnel killed in an Israeli strike a day earlier.

Fellow civil defence personnel holding Lebanese flags lined up for an honour guard as the coffins passed, also draped in the national flag, with a rescue helmet and flak jacket placed on top.

This week Beirut asked Washington to pressure Israel to halt its strikes ahead of the talks today and tomorrow.

Veteran diplomat Simon Karam will head the talks for Lebanon for the first time, as Washington seeks a historic breakthrough between the two sides despite the ongoing hostilities.

On Tuesday, Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem warned that his fighters would turn the battlefield into "hell" for Israel.

Since Hezbollah drew Lebanon into the wider regional war in early March, authorities say more than 2,800 people have been killed, including at least 200 children.

Hezbollah says the toll includes its fighters.

Israeli troops are operating inside an Israeli-declared "yellow line" which runs around 10 kilometres north of the Israel-Lebanon border. – AFP

No cadmium please: French want less toxin in their baguettes

Rebecca Frasquet and Sofia Bouderbala

PARIS – France is mulling how to prevent people from ingesting too much of the heavy metal cadmium, after a warning their breakfast cereal and baguettes could be contaminated with the toxin.

Here is what to know.

What is cadmium?

Cadmium is a chemical element naturally found in the ground at low levels, particularly in limestone-rich areas.

But the concentration of the carcinogenic element can increase through deposits, including phosphate fertilisers used to grow crops that then end up on people's plates.

What's the problem?

Nearly half of the French population last year had cadmium exposure levels exceeding reference values, France's National Agency for Health Security (ANSES) warned in March.

It noted "worrying cadmium contamination at all ages, starting from a very young age".

For non-smokers, this came primarily from consuming contaminated food including breakfast cereals, bread, croissants and other pastries, biscuits, rice and potatoes, it said.

How bad is it?

French doctors last year begged the authorities to act, saying women and children were especially being contaminated and blaming "phosphate fertilisers containing too much cadmium".

France's top health authority in 2024 warned that "repeated exposure to

low doses can be the cause of multiple health effects: on the kidneys, bones, respiratory system, nervous system, cardiovascular system, reproduction, and it can be carcinogenic".

When it is inhaled, through smoking or in industrial settings, it can cause lung cancer, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Ingesting too much of the toxin may also cause cancers of the kidney and prostate, it says.

What can be done?

France is mulling two ways to help: testing people to get a better measure of how widespread contamination is, and regulating fertilisers to limit new cadmium entering soils.

As a first step, France is soon to introduce a reimbursable test for people living in higher-risk areas, the health minister's office has said.

The health authority has recommended the test, to be introduced this summer, for people living in limestone-rich regions or near some 7,000 old industrial sites.

But doctors could also recommend it outside these regions, the ministry said.

François Blanchecotte, president of France's Federation of Medical Laboratories, said the urine test – and possibly blood test – would be able to determine if someone suffered from a "significant chronic intoxication".

"Something really had to be done: cadmium builds up silently in the body and can ultimately cause serious problems," he said.

Toxicologist Robert Garnier said reducing exposure was key as there was no medication to help eliminate it from the body.

"The top priority is to reduce

young children's exposure: not because there are risks for them today, but because they will eventually grow old," he said.

"Even the cadmium accumulated in childhood will not have been completely eliminated by the time they are over 60," he added.

What about fertilisers?

France's cadmium rate in earth of 0.25 mg/kg is only slightly higher than the EU average of 0.20, according to a 2024 study of topsoils in the bloc.

But some consumers are worried, with several petitions popping up online in recent months demanding the government take measures.

The ANSES health security agency has recommended lowering the maximum permitted cadmium levels in phosphate fertilisers from the current 90 mg/kg in France to 20 mg/kg.

Up to 60 mg/kg is allowed in these fertilisers in the European Union.

A bill, to be discussed in parliament next month, wants to cap allowed cadmium levels in fertiliser to 40 mg/kg by next year and 20 mg/kg by 2030.

The National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment has also recommended "limiting the use of synthetic fertilisers", which it says are already down by 70 percent compared to the 1980s.

It has also suggested farmers select wheat varieties for pasta and bread that are "less prone to accumulating cadmium".

Doctors have urged the government to help boost organic food consumption, especially in schools.

– AFP

Iran hangs man accused of spying for Israel

TEHRAN – Iran yesterday hanged a man found guilty of selling information to Israeli intelligence, the judiciary said, the latest in a wave of executions during the war with the country.

Since the start of the conflict with Israel and the United States in February, Iran has ramped up executions, particularly in cases involving alleged espionage or security-related charges.

"Ehsan Afreshteh, a spy trained by Mossad in Nepal who sold

sensitive information to Israel, has been executed," said the Iranian judiciary's Mizan Online website.

"Arrested and tried for espionage and collaboration with the Zionist regime, he was hanged this morning after... the verdict was upheld by the Supreme Court," it added.

On Monday, the country hanged an aerospace engineering student who had also been convicted of spying for Israel and the United States. – AFP

UN rights chief calls on Israel to abolish Oct 7 military tribunal

GENEVA – The United Nations rights chief yesterday called on Israel to repeal a newly established special military tribunal to try Palestinian militants accused of taking part in Hamas's October 7 attacks.

Israel's parliament passed a law establishing the tribunal, with the authority to hand down the death penalty, late on Monday.

The special court is set to try attackers captured during or after the Hamas-led onslaught. It will also try those suspected of holding or abusing hostages in Gaza.

According to Israeli media, around 400 suspects are expected to stand trial before the court.

"There must be full accountability for these horrific attacks, but this cannot be achieved through trials that fall short of international standards," Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human

Rights, said in a statement.

"This law must be overturned," he said.

"This law will inevitably institutionalise one-sided justice and discrimination against Palestinians, which cannot be in anyone's interest and runs counter to international human rights law," he said.

Hamas's attack resulted in the deaths of 1,221 people on the Israeli side, the majority of them civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official data, making it the deadliest day in Israel's history.

Militants also took 251 people hostage, including 44 who were already dead.

Israel's retaliatory military campaign has devastated the Gaza Strip and killed more than 72,000 people, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory, whose figures are considered reliable by the UN. – AFP

France locks down 1,700 on cruise ship after 92-year-old dies

BORDEAUX – French authorities yesterday confined more than 1,700 passengers and crew on a British cruise ship after an elderly passenger died and dozens suffered upset stomachs, health officials said.

They insisted there was no connection with the hantavirus outbreak, suspected of killing three passengers on the Dutch MV Hondius cruise ship that set sail from Argentina, which has sparked international alarm.

Dozens suffered from upset stomachs aboard the Ambition – most of whose 1,233 passengers are from Britain or Ireland – which arrived in the western port of Bordeaux on Tuesday, with 514 crew members also on board.

One 92-year-old British passenger on the Ambition, run by the UK-based Ambassador Cruise Line company, had died of a heart attack, health authorities said.

“At this stage, no link has been established with the gastroenteritis episode,” they added yesterday.

Initial tests ruled out an outbreak of norovirus, a highly contagious form of gastroenteritis which causes vomiting and diarrhoea, but secondary tests were still underway, they added.

Food poisoning had not been excluded.



Pedestrians walk past the Bahamas-registered cruise ship Ambition after passengers were confined following the outbreak of a gastrointestinal illness onboard, at Bordeaux Port, southwestern France, yesterday. – AFP

Seos Guilidhe, a 52-year-old from the Northern Irish capital Belfast, sent AFP a message via

Facebook as he was “playing bingo”.

“We are onboard with extra

sanitation guidelines in place. It is not as bad as it was during COVID-19. People just going about

as normal,” he wrote in the message, referring to lockdowns during the coronavirus pandemic.

“We are just waiting on test results coming back from the French government to see what the elder gentleman died from,” he added.

Waiting for ‘clearance’

Passengers on board the Ambition showed peak symptoms on Monday when the ship was docked in Brest, the officials said. The man in his nineties died before they arrived at the port in France’s northwestern Brittany region.

The ship, which left the Shetland Islands north of Scotland on May 6, stopped in Belfast and Liverpool in England before reaching Bordeaux, from where it was scheduled to depart for Spain.

It was initially supposed to dock back in Liverpool on May 22.

The cruise line company on its Facebook page said its figures showed an increase in cases after embarking guests in Liverpool.

No security measures were in place around the ship as it was docked in Bordeaux yesterday, an AFP reporter said. Passengers were taking pictures of the French city from the deck.

Those on board would be allowed to disembark “once clearance is granted”, the cruise line said. – AFP

Prosecutors demand 7-year sentence for Sarkozy

Alexandre Marchand and Nicolas Gaudichet

PARIS – French prosecutors yesterday requested a seven-year prison sentence for former president Nicolas Sarkozy in an appeal trial on charges that he sought Libyan financing for his 2007 election.

Sarkozy, France’s right-wing leader from 2007 to 2012, has always denied any wrongdoing but last year became modern France’s first former president to have gone to jail over the case, before he was released after 20 days pending his appeal trial.

Prosecutors had also requested seven years in the first trial over seeking to acquire funding from Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya for the campaign, as well as corruption, illegal campaign financing, and receiving misappropriated Libyan public funds.

A lower court sentenced him to five years only, over seeking to acquire the funding, but acquitted him of the three other charges.

In the latest trial, prosecutors called the former president the “instigator” of the alleged pact to receive funding to boost his campaign in exchange for help

to restore the Libyan leader’s international image after Tripoli was blamed for two plane bombings.

Sarkozy told the court there was “not a single cent of Libyan money” in the campaign that saw him elected in 2007.

A decision is expected on November 30.

If convicted, Sarkozy could then appeal to France’s top court.

In the initial trial, prosecutors had argued Sarkozy’s aides, acting in his name, struck a deal with Gaddafi to help people rehabilitate his global reputation.

The West laid the blame on Libya for the bombing of the Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 over Lockerbie in Scotland – which killed 259 people – and of the UTA Flight 772 over Niger the following year, which took the lives of 170 people.

Sarkozy, 71, has faced a raft of accusations since leaving office, all of which he has denied.

He has received two definitive convictions in other cases – linked to overspending in his failed 2012 re-election bid and later trying to extract favours from a judge.

– AFP

New trial ordered for US lawyer convicted of murdering wife, son

WASHINGTON, DC – A US court yesterday overturned the conviction of a prominent lawyer serving a life sentence for killing his wife and son in a sensational case that drew national attention.

Alex Murdaugh, 57, scion of an elite family of judges and attorneys, was denied a fair trial because a court clerk influenced the jury, the South Carolina Supreme Court said.

Murdaugh was found guilty in March 2023 of shooting his son Paul, 22, with a shotgun and his wife, Maggie, 52, with an assault rifle on the family’s sprawling hunting estate in June 2021.

The state Supreme Court, in a unanimous ruling, tossed out Murdaugh’s murder conviction and ordered a retrial.

Jurors who were questioned following Murdaugh’s trial reported that the court clerk, Rebecca Hill, had told them to closely watch his “body language” during his testimony and “not to be fooled” by evidence presented by his attorneys, the court said.

“Hill placed her fingers on the scales of justice, thereby denying Murdaugh his right to a fair trial by an impartial jury,” the justices said.

“We have no choice but to reverse the denial of Murdaugh’s motion for a new trial due to Hill’s improper external influence on the jury.”



This undated booking photo released by the Hampton County Detention Centre in South Carolina shows convicted US lawyer Alex Murdaugh. A US court yesterday overturned the conviction of the prominent lawyer serving a life sentence for killing his wife and son in a sensational case that drew national attention. – AFP

In ordering a new trial, the court also said the presiding judge at his murder trial had allowed too much evidence of Murdaugh’s financial crimes to be presented to the jury.

Murdaugh is also currently serving a 40-year prison sentence for financial crimes.

According to prosecutors, Murdaugh shot his wife and son after realising his years of stealing millions of US dollars from his law firm and from clients to feed his hidden opioid addiction were about to go public.

Murdaugh testified in his own

defence at his trial.

He admitted stealing, embezzling and lying about his drug habit, which his attorneys said cost US\$50,000 a week, but denied killing his wife and son.

Evidence from his son’s cell phone indicated, however, that Murdaugh was the only person with his wife and son at the estate’s dog kennels several minutes before they were killed.

His televised trial captivated viewers nationwide and Netflix and HBO rushed out docu-dramas on the case. – AFP

After winter storms, fires now threaten Portugal's forests

Levi Fernandes

MARINHA GRANDE – In a forest of pine and eucalyptus trees in central Portugal, chainsaws and diggers hum away clearing paths blocked by trees uprooted in winter storms, but the threat now is a high risk of summer fires.

A team of forest firefighters, civil protection officers and military personnel are out clearing trunks littering forest tracks that provide vital access routes to tackle blazers.

“This area is a real powder keg,” said Paulo Vicente, mayor of Marinha Grande, a coastal town home to the Leiria National Forest.

The forest was planted in the 13th century to provide timber used to build the caravels which saw seafarers set out to explore large swathes of the globe.

Fierce winds from Storm Kristin lashed the area in January, causing some 140 million euros (US\$164 million) of damage, local officials have said.

The storm left behind huge quantities of dead wood in the forest, which easily spark fire on a “massive scale,” said Vasco Fernandes, a municipal civil protection official.

‘More reassured’

“Our commitment is clear: defend the area and, above all, protect people” living nearby, Vicente insisted.

“Of course, I’m scared ... but if they clear all this away, I’ll feel much more reassured,” said Manuel Calhanas, a pensioner of 79 whose house is surrounded by an orchard.

The municipality, targeting the clearance of some 178 km of forest tracks, is still reeling from the major fires of October 2017.

Nationwide, 12,000 kilometres of forest tracks and roads are to be cleared this year, according to civil protection data.

Between January 22 and February 15, seven storms, including



Manuel Calhanas, a 79-year-old retiree, poses in the backyard of his house located in the middle of a eucalyptus and pine trees forest at Marinha Grande, central Portugal, last Thursday. – AFP



Civil protection workers use chainsaws to cut trees broken during Storm Kristin early this year, at Marinha Grande, central Portugal, last Thursday. – AFP

Kristin, hit Portugal with strong winds and heavy rain causing at least seven deaths and damage of some 5.3 billion euros.

‘Redouble efforts’

Prime Minister Luís Montenegro has urged “redoubled efforts” in forest clearance operations, while Interior Minister Luís Neves warned of a “very tough” summer fire season.

Between July 1 and September 30, Portugal, which last year had

its hottest summer since 1931, will spend some 50 million euros mobilising some 15,000 personnel and 80 aircraft or helicopters as the Iberian peninsula battles the effects of climate change and the increasingly frequent heatwaves and prolonged droughts it brings.

Despite a tenfold investment in prevention following the fires of 2017 that killed more than 100 people, Portugal saw 270,000 hectares of vegetation destroyed last year, its worst toll of the decade. – AFP

Amazon rainforest ‘under attack’ from organised crime: report

BRASÍLIA – Organised crime in South America is a growing threat to the Amazon rainforest, according to a report published on Tuesday, as the encroachment of criminal groups into protected areas fuels violence and sets back environmental preservation in the world’s largest tropical rainforest.

The report by the International Crisis Group think tank said the search for new drug trafficking routes and illegal mining areas is compelling organised crime rings to expand their reach in the Amazon basin, leading to devastating effects on the environment.

The Amazon “is under attack from organised crime,” the report concluded.

“Organised crime has become one of the main obstacles to efforts to stop environmental damage in the Amazon,” said Bram Ebus, a Crisis Group expert.

“What used to be primarily a conservation challenge has become a political and security crisis,” he added.

The report said gangs operate in at least 67 percent of Amazon municipalities in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, citing data from the Amazon Underworld periodical.

The International Crisis Group urged governments to work with indigenous communities to combat the spread of organised crime.

It also appealed to international suppliers of raw materials to ensure their supply chains are not tainted with products from criminal origins.

Surveillance in the vast, remote rainforest has never been simple.

The Amazon rainforest stretches across nine South American nations, with the majority located in Brazil. It has a central role in the fight to combat climate change.

The report mentions that organised crime groups take advantage of government weak spots to expand their territory throughout the jungle, particularly Brazilian crime groups like Comando Vermelho (“Red Command”) and First Capital Command (PCC).

The spread occasionally crosses borders with nearby countries like Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador, competing or even collaborating with armed groups from the neighbouring states.

The think tank added that such crime groups were “exercising a brutal violence” in communities under their control. – AFP



This aerial view shows deforested areas in the Amazon rainforest in the municipality of Nova Esperança do Piriá, Pará State, Brazil, on November 12, 2025, during the COP30 UN Climate Change Conference. – AFP

Lula launches plan to fight organised crime ahead of elections



Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva gestures as he speaks during the launch of a government programme titled “Brazil Against Organised Crime”, at the Planalto Palace in the capital Brasília on Tuesday. – AFP

BRASÍLIA – Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on Tuesday launched a new plan to combat organised crime as he faces mounting pressure over security, five months ahead of elections.

Brazil’s battle with powerful criminal factions has been a point of tension with Washington, and was high on the agenda of a meeting between Lula and US President Donald Trump last week.

“Today’s event serves as a signal to organised crime, telling them that very soon, they will no longer be the masters of any territory,” Lula said in Brasília on Tuesday.

The country’s two main crime groups, Comando Vermelho (“Red Command”) and First Capital Command (PCC), wield control over large swathes of territory in Brazil, from the favelas (shantytowns) in Rio de Janeiro to parts of the Amazon rainforest, where they engage in drug and arms trafficking and extortion.

Voter surveys ahead of October’s presidential election have put security as

Brazilians’ main concern, above the usual worries of the economy or corruption.

Lula, 80, who is seeking a fourth non-consecutive term, has often faced accusations from his opponents that he is lax on crime.

Trump has made the fight against so-called “narcoterrorism” a priority of his second term, designating major cartels as foreign terrorist organisations.

Brazil is keen to avoid such designations, and in recent weeks has stepped up intelligence sharing with the US to combat arms and drug trafficking.

“I told President Trump that if he was willing to seriously tackle the fight against organised crime, Brazil possessed the expertise and was eager to work together,” Lula said.

Lula’s new plan aims to focus on financially strangling criminal factions, disrupting money laundering and cracking down on illicit markets that supply these groups, such as arms trafficking.

He said the government had

earmarked about US\$200 million in direct funding for these efforts this year, and US\$2 billion to equip security forces with specialised equipment, such as drones, armoured vehicles, signal jammers and forensic equipment.

The government also plans to implement maximum-security standards in dozens of prisons across the country in a bid to sever organised crime leaders’ ability to operate from behind bars.

Lula’s main rival in the election is Flávio Bolsonaro, the 45-year-old son of former far-right president Jair Bolsonaro. They are neck-and-neck in the polls.

On social media, the senator mocked the president’s plan, saying: “Brazil can’t stand one more PowerPoint speech against organised crime.”

Bolsonaro’s campaign is already leaning heavily on headline plans to fight organised crime, calling for the construction of many prisons and praising the controversial security policies of El Salvador’s President Nayib Bukele.

– AFP

World Cup comes to 'Soccer Town USA,' but locals priced out

Ben Turner

KEARNY, USA — Anthony Duro had hoped the World Cup coming to his soccer-mad New Jersey town would mean watching games at nearby MetLife Stadium, but sky-high ticket prices are beyond his budget.

The 20-year-old is one of many people in the industrial suburb of Kearny, nicknamed "Soccer Town USA" for its footballing history, priced out by the FIFA tournament facing criticism over soaring costs.

"It's annoying because it would be nice to go to see a country play here, especially since I live so close to the stadium," Duro told AFP at a soccer field flanked by a scrapyard and warehouses.

"For me, it's ridiculous," the goalkeeper added, taking a break from palming away shots struck by friends wearing colourful Brazil

and Barcelona jerseys.

The most expensive face value ticket for the 2026 final at MetLife Stadium is more than US\$30,000 - well above the peak of around US\$1,600 for the 2022 final. Standard tickets ranged from about US\$2,800 to almost US\$4,200 initially, but now resale for almost US\$11,000.

Fan groups have erupted over the costs: Football Supporters Europe labelled the World Cup pricing structure a "monumental betrayal."

Even President Donald Trump has said he would not pay the US\$1,000-plus ticket cost for the United States' first World Cup match.

Finance student Duro, like others priced out in Kearny, will instead be watching the tournament from his home - around seven miles from the MetLife.

'Extravagant prices'

Unlike other US towns, soccer is the dominant sport in Kearny, mostly due to Scottish and Irish immigrants who transplanted the game in the late 1800s as they arrived for factory jobs.

Since then Kearny's youth system has produced three US men's national team players including Tony Meola, and the hilly town of 40,000 people boasts its role in promoting US soccer.

Many locals are frustrated to be watching the world's biggest footballing competition from the sidelines.

"Soccer is supposed to bring people together," said Sean McDonald, a member of the Scots American Club, which is linked to the historic Kearny Scots soccer team founded in 1895.

"With the extravagant prices and the costs involved in this World

Cup, it's not going to achieve that," the 51-year-old added.

He spoke to AFP from the clubhouse filled with memorabilia that included scarves reading "Soccer Town USA" and a picture of Brazil legend Pele with a former club member.

"They're charging an awful lot of money," McDonald said of the World Cup, as a Premier League match played on a television behind the bar.

"I think that that's being felt by a lot of people in this area who would love to go, but they just simply don't have the means."

'Take a little less'

FIFA president Gianni Infantino has justified the organisation's ticket prices by saying they are appropriate for the United States, which is hosting the bulk of the fixtures.

But that argument did not win

people over in Kearny.

"Why is it so expensive because it's in the States? It's making us look bad a little bit," said Andrew Pollock, CEO of the Scots American Club.

He called for FIFA to sacrifice its revenue - expected to total US\$13 billion for this year's tournament - to subsidise World Cup tickets.

"We're all under the impression that FIFA is going to take billions every year of a World Cup. Why can't they take a little less?" Pollock said.

Jose Rodrigues, who drank a Guinness at the dark wood-panelled bar with his wife Ann, agreed that the tournament was out of reach for his family of five.

"I'm not gonna go pay US\$1,000 for a ticket or US\$500 for a ticket. Screw that. We're not doing it," the 54-year-old insurance worker said.

"The average Joe's not gonna be able to afford to go," Rodrigues added. — AFP

Milan-Cortina chief Malago presents bid to lead Italian FA

Football

ROME — Giovanni Malago, who headed the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics, presented his bid for the presidency of Italy's football federation (FIGC) yesterday.

Former FIGC president Giancarlo Abete, the only other candidate for the job ahead of the vote on June 22, also presented a rival bid.

Italian football was sent into a tailspin in March after the men's national team failed for a third consecutive time to qualify for the World Cup, with Gabriele Gravina stepping down as FIGC chief.

Coach Gennaro Gattuso and

team general manager Gianluigi Buffon also resigned following elimination in the qualification play-offs by Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Malago was president of the Milan-Cortina organising committee and also head of the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), the country's highest sporting body, between 2013 and 2025.

The 67-year-old is the heavy favourite to replace Gravina as he already had the backing of Serie A and the players and coaches associations, which together count for 48 percent of the votes.

And on Tuesday, Serie B, which controls six percent of the votes, also

said it would back Malago, although that decision was contingent on a review of the two candidates' programmes for the FIGC.

Whoever follows Gravina will not only have to appoint a new national team coach, but also satisfy a long-standing desire for reform within the FIGC and head Italy's part of Euro 2032, which is being co-hosted with Turkey.

Last month UEFA chief Aleksander Ceferin told the *Gazzetta Dello Sport* that Italy could lose the tournament due to the condition of the country's football stadiums, which he called "some of the worst in Europe". — AFP

Football shorts

Carrick on brink of permanent Man Utd job: reports

LONDON — Michael Carrick is expected to be recommended as Manchester United's permanent manager by club chiefs after overseeing a dramatic improvement in the club's fortunes, it was widely reported yesterday.

The 44-year-old took over for the rest of the campaign in January following an acrimonious end to Ruben Amorim's rocky Red Devils reign.

United clinched Champions League qualification with three matches to spare after being out of the competition for two seasons.

Carrick, appointed on January 13, has won 10 of his 15 matches in charge in all competitions, losing just twice, to guide United from seventh to third in the Premier League table.

The *Athletic* reported that chief executive Omar Berrada and director of football Jason Wilcox would recommend to co-owner Jim Ratcliffe that Carrick be offered the role at an executive meeting this week.

United have explored other options but Carrick has long been considered the frontrunner for a job that he has been publicly backed for by a number of players.

Some bookmakers have suspended betting on his appointment.

Carrick is set to face the media tomorrow ahead of Sunday's final home game of the season against Nottingham Forest. — AFP

World Cup broadcast deadlock ends up in Indian court

NEW DELHI — A standoff over World Cup broadcasting rights in India has ended up in the courts with fans fearing they won't be able to watch football's biggest party when it begins in under a month.

The Delhi High Court on Tuesday issued a notice to the Indian government and public broadcaster Prasar Bharti to respond to a petition filed by a lawyer pleading for live coverage.

FIFA had sought about US\$100 million from broadcasters wanting to show the 2026 and 2030

World Cups but so far JioStar has offered only about US\$20 million, according to local reports.

China and Thailand are also yet to strike a deal to show the finals when they kick off on June 11, leaving swathes of Asia potentially facing a blackout.

The petition filed to the court argued that the absence of a broadcast arrangement deprived citizens of their "fundamental right to receive information".

"India stands as one of the few major markets without a broadcaster," it said, noting that no viewing deal had been sealed despite the World Cup being designated a "sporting event of national importance".

"Without timely judicial intervention... the petitioner and millions of Indian citizens will be irreparably deprived of their fundamental rights with no adequate alternative remedy," says the petition, seen by AFP.

The next hearing is scheduled for May 20.

The World Cup is being co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico.



Atletico Madrid's Norwegian forward Alexander Sorloth (left) fights for the ball with Osasuna's Cameroonian defender Flavien Boyomo during the Spanish league match between CA Osasuna and Club Atletico de Madrid at El Sadar Stadium in Pamplona, Spain on Tuesday. Atletico won the match 2-1. — AFP

Broadcasters in Asia have been cautious about bidding for rights, citing concerns that late-night kickoff times in the region could dent viewership and advertising revenues.

India, the world's most populous nation with 1.4 billion people, are not playing at the World Cup. — AFP

Mbappe can show 'commitment' to Real Madrid: Arbeloa

MADRID — Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa called on French striker Kylian Mbappe yesterday to show "his commitment" to the team in the last three matches of the season.

Mbappe has faced criticism from the club's own fans in recent weeks, in part for going on holiday to Sardinia during his recovery from a thigh injury.

The forward missed Madrid's Clasico defeat by Barcelona on Sunday which confirmed the Catalan giants as La Liga champions for a second season running and ensured Los Blancos finish the season empty-handed.

"If he's there and can complete

the training session and is available, then he'll definitely get some minutes... and the chance in these three games to keep showing the commitment he has to the club," Arbeloa told reporters.

The Spanish coach said he hopes top scorer Mbappe can play and keep "scoring goals, showing, as I've said, the commitment he has to Real Madrid and that, as a coach but above all as a Madridista, is what I'd like to see".

Arbeloa said he believes France captain Mbappe has given 100 percent to the team, ahead of today's La Liga match against relegated Real Oviedo.

Mbappe is likely to be the target of whistles from Madrid supporters at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"All my players (have), I couldn't think otherwise, I couldn't believe that a Real Madrid player doesn't give absolutely everything he has for the club, because then he wouldn't know where he is," said Arbeloa.

The game will be played at 3:30 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time. — AFP/MPD

Revived Swiatek cruises past Pegula and into Italian Open semis

Tennis

ROME – Iga Swiatek gave another indication that she might be back to her brilliant best after destroying Jessica Pegula 6-1, 6-2 at the Foro Italico yesterday and breezing into the Italian Open semi-finals.

A three-time champion in Rome, Swiatek took little more than an hour to take care of fifth seed Pegula on centre court, without facing a single break point.

It was a show of force on her preferred surface not seen since she last won the French Open two years ago, and gave Swiatek her first semi-final appearance of the season.

“I’ve been playing a bit differently, I would say. More similar to how I played couple years ago, more like a clay court player,” Swiatek told reporters.

“I guess all the things that we practiced really clicked during last few matches.”

Swiatek has set up a clash with either second seed Elena Rybakina or Elina Svitolina, also in action on centre court yesterday, in the last four.

A potential decider with reigning Roland Garros champion Coco Gauff waits for the winner of that last-four match-up in tomorrow’s final.

Pole Swiatek hasn’t won a clay-court tournament since claiming the most recent of her four Roland Garros titles, with personal problems a factor in her poor performances.

But since struggling through her second-round win against Caty McNally Swiatek has dropped just seven games in three matches.

Swiatek, a six-time Grand Slam champion, recently took on board Francisco Roig, the former coach of men’s clay-court icon Rafael Nadal after a difficult opening few months of the season.

The 24-year-old got to the quarter-finals in Stuttgart in early April and forced to retire



Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return to USA's Jessica Pegula during the ATP Rome Open tennis tournament at Foro Italico in Rome yesterday. – AFP

from the Madrid Open in the third round due to a viral infection.

Rudd in to last four

But the kind of form showed yesterday suggests she could be favourite for a fourth Foro Italico title and back in the mix for the French Open crown.

In the men’s tournament Casper Ruud reached his first Masters 1000 semi-final since winning in Madrid last year after beating Karen Khachanov 6-1, 1-6, 6-2 in a match interrupted by a long rain delay.

Norwegian Ruud was one game down in the second set when a downpour fell on Rome, forcing the match to be paused for over two hours, and when play resumed

Khachanov quickly levelled the match.

But Ruud claimed his tour-leading 139th win on clay since the start of the 2020 season and will face one of Rafael Jodar, who was knocked out in the Madrid last eight by Jannik Sinner, or Luciano Darderi.

“A little bit of a, you know, down period in the second (set) when we came back after the rain,” said Ruud on court.

“But very proud of the first and the third sets... the quality that I played in the first and third sets is probably some of the best I felt on court recently.”

Italy’s Darderi is playing the biggest quarter-final of his career after knocking out second seed Alexander Zverev on Tuesday. – AFP

Sport in brief

History-maker Sawe to compete at Berlin Marathon

Athletics

BERLIN – Sebastian Sawe, who became the first person run a marathon in under two hours, will compete at the Berlin Marathon in September, race organisers announced yesterday.

The 31-year-old Kenyan smashed the previous world record when he ran the London Marathon in 1hr 59min 30sec in April wearing a new model of super shoes.

Now he will doubtless set his eyes on further lowering his historic time on September 27 at the Berlin Marathon, which is known for producing world records due to its flat course with relatively few corners.

Sawe won the last edition of the Berlin Marathon with a time of 2:02:16 despite heat and humidity in the German capital.

“I am very happy to return to (the Berlin Marathon) this year and to defend my title,” Sawe, who won the race last year, said in a statement released by organisers.

“Many people may be wondering what my goals are this time round.

“After coming off my win in London and sub-2 performance, I can only say that, like always, I plan to prepare myself to the best of my ability and to come to Berlin to honour this great event and organisation which have invited me, and to run as well and fast as possible. Then on the day we will see what will happen.” –AFP

Italy’s Musetti to sit out Roland Garros with thigh injury

Tennis

ROME – Lorenzo Musetti said yesterday that he will miss Roland Garros with the thigh injury which led to him being eliminated from the Italian Open.

Italian Musetti will drop out of the top 10 of the men’s world rankings following defeat to Casper Ruud at the last-16 stage in Rome, during which he clearly had trouble moving.

“After yesterday’s match, I underwent medical examinations which revealed a rectus femoris (thigh) injury, requiring several weeks of rest and recovery,” said Musetti on Instagram.

“Unfortunately, this means that I won’t be able to compete in Hamburg and Roland Garros.”

The main draw of the French Open starts in Paris on May 24.

Musetti reached the semi-finals of last year’s edition, but retired while losing to eventual tournament winner Carlos Alcaraz. –AFP

FIFA announces cross-border anti-doping cooperation for 2026 World Cup

GENEVA – FIFA yesterday announced a joint anti-doping initiative with agencies from the United States, Canada and Mexico ahead of the 2026 World Cup, which



For the Game. For the World.

Keys says players will strike over Grand Slam pay if ‘necessary’

Tennis

Damien Gaudissart

PARIS – Former Australian Open champion Madison Keys told AFP that “many players” are united on the question of Grand Slam prize money and that they will boycott a major tournament if their voices are not heard.

Last year almost all the leading players signed two letters to the four Grand Slam bosses demanding an increase in prize money, payments into a player welfare fund to improve retirement and maternity benefits, as well as involvement in decisions that affected them.

The letters set a target of a 22-percent share in tournament revenue, which would bring the majors in line with the nine combined 1000-level events run by the ATP men’s tour and the women’s WTA tour.

However, some players feel their demands are not being taken into serious consideration.

“I think it’s incredibly important that the players have more of a voice when it comes to the big decisions that are being made,” world number 19 Keys told AFP in Paris, where she is warming up for Roland Garros by playing in the WTA 125 Trophee Clarins event.

“And I think that it has been many, many years where players have tried to come to the table and have the discussion and it hasn’t really gotten anywhere.”

The American added that seeing “so many players... unified” on the matter was “very inspiring”.

This strength of feeling has led to talk of a potential boycott of a Grand Slam tournament.

“We have kind of come together and agreed that if that’s what’s necessary, then we’ll do it,” Keys said.

“Hopefully it would never get to that point, but I think it’s great to see how many, especially so many of the younger players are so willing to stand up for all players.”

‘Many are willing’

The 31-year-old is the latest top player to address the matter, after men’s world number one Jannik Sinner last week called for Grand Slam tournaments to show tennis players “respect”.

Two days prior to Sinner’s comments, women’s top-ranked player Aryna Sabalenka said that she was ready to boycott the Grand Slams in order for the players to force organisers’ hands.

Those comments came after players said in a statement that last month’s announcement by the French Open of a 9.5-percent prize money rise was not good enough.

It said that a 14-percent increase in revenue last year only led to the total prize purse going up by 5.4 percent, reducing the players’ share to 14.3 percent.

Former world number five Keys said if there was a movement to boycott upcoming majors this year, such as Roland Garros, which starts on May 24, or Wimbledon, then she would heed the call.

“I think it’s one of those things where it’s just something that you talk about until it actually happens. So I’m as prepared (to boycott) as I need to be,” she said.

“It’s something that it seems as though many players are willing to do. So again, hopefully it doesn’t actually get to that point, but to see so many people that are willing to get to that point for all players, I think is inspiring.” –AFP

–Xinhua

Favourites Finland, Israel through at Eurovision semis

Robin Millard

VIENNA – Favourites Finland made it through the first Eurovision semi-final on Tuesday alongside Israel, whose participation saw five countries boycott the world's biggest live televised music event.

With blasts of dry ice and jets of flame, the Eurovision party got started inside the Wiener Stadthalle ("Vienna City Hall") in Vienna, where 11,200 revved-up fans saw 15 acts battle for 10 places in Saturday's grand final.

Belgium upset the odds to make it through, with Croatia, Greece, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Serbia, and Sweden also progressing.

However, it was the end of the road for Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro and Portugal's dreams of Eurovision glory.

Tiny San Marino also bowed out, despite featuring guest vocals from 1980s Culture Club star Boy George.

Viewers across Europe and beyond were treated to styles ranging from upbeat Estonian guitar pop to soaring Polish high notes and the brooding mystery of Lithuania's silver-painted Lion Ceccah.

Moldova opened the show with rapper Satoshi pumping up the energy.

Greece has been gaining traction with "Ferto", featuring singer Akylas in tigerprint coat,

shorts and hat against a retro video game backdrop in a performance that also showcased knitting, a glitterball and a classical statue that came to life.

"I was so happy, I got so emotional, the crowd was there singing 'Ferto' with me, it was amazing," he said afterwards.

Croatia's ethno-pop group Lelek delved into mythical fantasy visuals on "Andromeda", opening with the lines "When you light a candle, ask your grandmother / Why she gave birth to daughters in fear".

Serbian progressive metal band Lavina closed the concert with a throat-shredding growl.

Biggest-ever boycott

This year marks the 70th edition of Eurovision, which despite the razzmatazz rarely escapes the politics in the background.

Israel's war in the Gaza Strip prompted Spain, Ireland, Slovenia, the Netherlands and Iceland to withdraw from the glitzy annual extravaganza – the biggest-ever political boycott.

With fans waving Israeli flags, Noam Bettan performed "Michelle", a song in Hebrew, French and English.

"I was free, I was me, I was authentic, I felt like my voice is in a good place... and I enjoyed every moment," he said.



Israeli singer Noam Bettan (right), representing Israel with the song 'Michelle', performs during the first semi-final of the Eurovision Song Contest 2026 (ESC) at Wiener Stadthalle ("Viennese City Hall") in the Austrian capital Vienna on Tuesday. – AFP

"There were moments when I felt that I'm just singing to my people back home."

Earlier, a few dozen pro-Palestinian activists placed coffins in central Vienna in protest.

"Israel has become an aggressor," demonstrator Karin Spindlberger, 67, told AFP.

"Music should be universal, and it is. Music should bring people together – but not in this way."

Eurovision director Martin Green told a press conference the protests showed that Vienna allowed

everyone to express themselves.

"It is a profoundly good sign of a democracy where you can have this show happening on one side of the city and a protest happening on the other side and they can both co-exist. Maybe the world can learn from that," he said.

Finnish flamethrowers

Thanks to operatic singer JJ's victory last year with "Wasted Love", Austria is hosting for the third time, having staged the 1967 and 2015 contests.

This year, the semi-finals are being decided both by public vote and, for the first time since Turin 2022, by professional juries, in a bid to restore fans' faith in the voting system.

Finnish duo Linda Lampenius and Pete Parkkonen are the overall Eurovision favourites with "Liekinheitin", or "Flamethrower".

"This is like the Olympics of the music world, and it's nothing you take for granted that we would be in the final," said violinist Lampenius.

"There's something between us that somehow when I had been listening to Pete's way of singing and playing and everything, I just knew that we think alike and we feel alike."

At Eurovision, normally only the lead vocal is live, with the music on a backing track.

However, Lampenius was given special dispensation to play her instrument live – a rare event since orchestras were phased out after Birmingham 1998.

Fifteen more acts will compete in today's second semi, with 10 going through.

Alongside Eurovision's major financial backers Britain, France, Germany and Italy, hosts Austria have a guaranteed spot in Saturday's 25-country showpiece final.

– AFP

Stars descend as Cannes Film Festival opens without Hollywood backing

Adam Plowright

CANNES – Celebrities from Demi Moore to "The Lord of the Rings" US star Elijah Wood headed up the red carpet for the opening ceremony of the Cannes Film Festival on Tuesday, where the impact of AI and the absence of Hollywood studios are major talking points.

The annual film extravaganza on the French Riviera was declared open by US cinema veteran Jane Fonda and Chinese-Singaporean star Gong Li (鞏俐) at a star-studded ceremony attended by "Black Panther" Ivorian actor Isaach de Bankolé and "Spider-Man" US actor James Franco.

Fonda, a vocal critic of US President Donald Trump and long-standing anti-war and women's rights campaigner, urged the industry to create films that serve as "an act of resistance".

"We tell the stories... that bring empathy to the marginalised, stories that allow us to feel across difference, stories that let us see that there is an alternative future that is possible," she said.

Wood, who starred as Frodo Baggins in "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy, was reunited with director Peter Jackson on stage as he handed the New Zealand filmmaker an honorary Palme d'Or award for his epic career.

Jackson was typically self-deprecating as he accepted the award to a prolonged standing ovation, saying it was a "stunning surprise, miraculous... I am not a Palme d'Or sort of guy".

Off-screen events

In the main Cannes competition, which began yesterday, a total of 22 films are vying for the prestigious Palme d'Or prize for best film, which

was won last year by Iranian movie "It Was Just an Accident" by Jafar Panahi.

The competition features a handful of historical dramas pondering the impact of authoritarianism and fascism, as well as others from arthouse heavy hitters such as Spain's Pedro Almodóvar, Japan's Hirokazu Kore-eda or Romania's Cristian Mungiu.

As usual in the build up to the festival, off-screen events have dominated the conversation, from the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on jobs, Hollywood's decision to ghost the event, to the under-representation of women directors.

Irish-Scottish screenwriter Paul Laverty, one of the nine-person Palme d'Or jury, took a shot at Hollywood in a press conference just hours before the opening ceremony.

"Isn't it fascinating to see Susan Sarandon, Javier Bardem and Mark Ruffalo blacklisted because of their views in opposing the murder of women and children in Gaza?" Laverty said in reference to the stars who have publicly opposed Israel's war in Gaza.

"Shame on Hollywood, people who do that," the Scottish-born writer added.

For years, activists have pushed European festivals to condemn Israel's war in Gaza, which left tens of thousands dead and devastated the territory – calls that have been resisted.

AI fears

Cannes festival director Thierry Frémaux came out strongly against AI

and its effect on the industry, however, where job losses are mounting.

"What is certain... is that here in Cannes, we stand with the artists, we stand with the screenwriters and we stand with everyone in these professions, with actors and voice actors alike," he told reporters on Monday.

Nonetheless, the festival said on Monday that it had signed a multi-year sponsorship deal with social media giant and AI technology investor Meta.

Mark Zuckerberg's group is at the heart of a brewing controversy about the latest film from Oscar-winning "Traffic" director Steven Soderbergh, which will premiere in Cannes.

Soderbergh partnered with Meta to obtain AI-generated video of late Beatles songwriter John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono for his documentary "John Lennon: The Last Interview".

'Come back'

Soderbergh is a rare Hollywood directing heavyweight in Cannes this year, with others such as Steven Spielberg and Christopher Nolan – hoped for by organisers – failing to appear on the programme.

The world's biggest film festival typically relies on Hollywood to provide a dose of mass-market entertainment alongside its programme of arthouse cinema.

But no major US studio agreed to launch a blockbuster this year, or at the Berlin International Film Festival in February, raising



US actress Jane Fonda, 88, poses upon arrival for the opening ceremony and the screening of the film "La Vénus électrique," (English title: "The Electric Kiss") at the 79th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France, on Tuesday. – AFP

questions about why giants such as Universal, Disney or Warner are dodging European events.

"I really hope that the studios come back," Frémaux said on Monday, attributing their absence to scheduling issues and industry turmoil.

He stressed that US cinema was well represented, with "Paper Tiger" by James Gray starring Adam Driver, as well as "The Man I Love" by Ira Sachs featuring Rami Malek, in the main competition.

– AFP

| World Weather | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| CHINA | ASIA-PACIFIC | WORLD | LUSOPHONE |
| Beijing 18°C~34°C | Manila 26°C~35°C | New York 12°C~18°C | Lisbon 12°C~21°C |
| Shanghai 18°C~28°C | Bangkok 27°C~35°C | London 5°C~13°C | Rio de Janeiro 20°C~26°C |
| Hong Kong 23°C~28°C | Tokyo 13°C~26°C | Frankfurt 5°C~13°C | Luanda 21°C~27°C |
| Taipei 21°C~26°C | Singapore 25°C~33°C | Vancouver 8°C~15°C | Maputo 17°C~26°C |
| Guangzhou 22°C~28°C | Kuala Lumpur 25°C~35°C | Paris 4°C~13°C | Dili 25°C~32°C |
| Nanjing 18°C~30°C | Jakarta 25°C~34°C | Moscow 12°C~22°C | São Tomé 26°C~31°C |
| Guilin 20°C~31°C | Seoul 16°C~31°C | Las Vegas 21°C~36°C | Praia 20°C~27°C |
| Xi'an 18°C~27°C | Sydney 13°C~21°C | Monte Carlo 12°C~21°C | Bissau 20°C~34°C |



Such a privilege to see

Snow leopards are pictured in Shiqu County of Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, on Tuesday. Three snow leopards, a mother and her cubs, were photographed in Shiqu County on Tuesday. Known as the "king of the snow mountains," snow leopards are under first-class national protection in China. They are native to snow-capped mountains in central and southern Asia and serve as a barometer for the health of the entire high-altitude ecosystem. — Xinhua



Forget driverless cars!

A dog wearing a suit drives a car on the Boulevard de la Croisette ahead of the official ceremony on the sidelines of the 79th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France, on Tuesday. — AFP



Mother nature's strength

This photograph shows a wildflower emerging from scorched earth in Thezan-des-Corbieres, southwestern France yesterday. Teams from the National Forestry Commission (ONF) are at work in the Corbieres mountains, which were devastated nine months ago by a massive wildfire, to limit soil erosion and facilitate the regeneration of the forest cover, AFP observed yesterday, during a press visit to the Aude department. — AFP



Adding to the numbers

A Golden snub-nosed monkey cub (second right) sits among other Golden snub-monkeys in their enclosure at the Pairi Daiza animal park in Brugelette, south-western Belgium on Tuesday. The Pairi Daiza animal park announced on Tuesday the birth of a second Golden snub-nosed monkey just a few weeks after the first birth. — AFP



How many?

An employee works at a guitar industrial park in Dong'an County of Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, on Monday. — Xinhua



Forest protector

This aerial view shows the sculpture of a Tsachila indigenous women at the Jelen Tenka Park (the heart of the jungle in the Tsafiqui language) in Santo Domingo, Ecuador, last Saturday. — AFP